Fate/Zero

Volume 1

The Untold Story of the Fourth Holy Grail War

Nasu Kinoko
Urobuchi Gen

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First Edition

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Original Translation
Baka-Tsuki / www.baka-tsuki.org

Editing & Publication
kureshii / kureshii@gmail.com

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Prologue

Eight years ago

Let us tell a story about a particular man. A man who believed in his ideals more than anyone else, and by those ideals was driven to despair.

His dream was pure. He wished for everyone in this world to be happy; it was all he asked. It is a childish ideal that all young boys will grow attached to at least once, an ideal they will abandon as they grow accustomed to reality's harshness. Happiness requires a sacrifice—this is something that all children learn when they reach adulthood.

But that man was different. Perhaps he was simply the biggest fool of all. Perhaps he was broken somewhere within his mind. Or perhaps he was one of those whom we call Saints, those entrusted with God's will. One whom common folk would never understand.

He knew that for any existence in this world, his only two choices were sacrifice or salvation, and he understood that

Heaven's judgment granted nothing ... Henceforth, he set his mind to tipping that scale.

To abate the world's grief, there was no better way, no method more efficient. To save just one life on one side, he had to forsake a life on the other side. To let the majority survive, he had to leave a minority to die. Therefore, rather than protecting people for the sake of saving someone, he chose to excel at the art of killing people.

Again and again, he painted his hands the color of blood. Never flinching, never questioning the righteousness of his acts or doubting his goal, he forced himself to only tip the scale faultlessly.

He never misjudged the value of a life. With no regard to the humility or age of any existence, all lives were weighed evenly. Without discrimination, he saved, and without discrimination, he killed.

Regretfully, he realized—too late—that in order to value everyone with equal fairness, he could not love anyone. Had he carved that inviolable rule into his spirit sooner, he could have attained salvation.

Freezing his young heart into necrosis to become a bloodless, tearless measuring machine, he sorted those who were to die, and those who were to live. There was no suffering for him. But the man was wrong.

A delighted smile would fill his chest with pride, and a wailing voice would shake his heart. Anger was added to his resentment, and he grew regretful as tears of loneliness longed for hands that reached out to him. For someone pursuing an ideal beyond the

reason of men, he was too human. How many times had he been punished by this contradiction?

He did know about friendship. He did know about love. Even when he put that one beloved life and an uncountable number of complete strangers on opposite sides of the scale . . . He certainly never, ever made a mistake.

Beyond loving someone, and judging that life on the same level as other lives, he had to value it impartially, and impartially he had to forfeit it. Even when he was with someone precious to him, he always seemed to be mourning. And now, the man was being inflicted with the greatest punishment.

Outside the window, a snowstorm had frozen everything. A mid-winter night congealed the ground of the forest.

The room lay in an old castle built on the frozen soil, but it was protected by the gentle flame burning in the fireplace. In the warmth of that shelter, the man was holding a new existence in his arms. It was a really small one—a body so tiny it was nearly ephemeral, without any weight by which one could gauge its readiness.

Here, even a delicate touch could be dangerous, as with the first snow scooped by hand which crumbles with a mere jolt. In frail eagerness, the child slept to preserve her body temperature, breathing leniently. It was all the modestly throbbing chest could manage at the moment.

"Don't worry. She is sleeping."

As he lifted the baby in his arms, the resting mother laid on the couch and smiled at them. The mother's haggard look

suggested she was not yet out of danger, and her complexion was imperfect; even so, her beautiful face, reminiscent of a jewel, had not deteriorated in any way. Above all, a blissful tone brightened her smile and erased the exhaustion that otherwise threatened to wear out her gentle look.

"She was always a difficult child, crying even when held by the nurses, whom she should already be accustomed to. This is the first time she let herself be held so quietly . . . She understands, doesn't she? That it is fine, because you are a good man."

"..."

Silent and dumbfounded, the man compared the mother on the bed to the child in his arms. Had Irisviel's smile ever looked so dazzling?

She had been a woman of little happiness. No one had ever thought of giving her that feeling called "happiness." She was not a creation of gods; she was created by men . . . For a homunculus, such treatment was normal. Irisviel never had any wish.

Created as a puppet and brought up like one, perhaps she never understood the meaning of happiness to begin with. And yet, at that moment, she was beaming.

"I am really glad I had this child."

Quietly bringing forth her love, Irisviel von Einsbern spoke as she watched over the sleeping child.

"Henceforth, she will be, first and foremost, an imitation of a human. It will be tough, and she might hate the mother who thrust such a painful existence upon her. But I am happy. This child is lovely; she is splendid."

She did not seem unusual in any way, and was by all appearances a lovely baby, yet—While still in the womb, a number of magical treatments had been applied on the unborn body, reconfiguring it to be different from a human's, and making it even more disparately inhuman than the mother's was. Even if it was born, its usefulness was restricted; the body was a mere cluster of magic circuits. This was the true nature of Irisviel's beloved daughter.

Despite the cruelty of such a birth, Irisviel still decided to go ahead with it. Having been born as such a thing, and having given birth to such a thing, she loved its existence, found pride in it, and smiled. That strength, that bracing heart, came about because she was, undoubtedly, a *mother*.

The girl—just a puppet—had found love, and became a woman who learnt of the immovable strength a mother. Nobody could meddle with that look of happiness. Right now, the bedchamber of the mother and child, protected by the warmth of the fireplace, was indifferent to all despair and sorrow.

But—the man knew better. In the world he was part of, the snowstorm blowing outside the window was most appropriate.

"Iri, I—"

As he spoke, the man felt his chest pierced by a blade—the blade of a peacefully sleeping face and the dazzling smile of a mother.

"I will someday be the plight that kills you."

A gagging sensation rose, bloody, in his throat. Irisviel nodded at his declaration, a peaceful expression on her face.

"I understand. Of course. That is the earnest wish of the Einsberns. That is what I am here for."

That was the future which had already been decided. Six years later, the man would bring his wife to her dying place. As the victim who was to save the world, Irisviel had become the sacrifice devoted to his ideal.

The matter had been discussed several times between the two, and they had come to an agreement. The man cried his heart out at the decision, and cursed himself for it. Each time, Irisviel had forgiven him and encouraged him.

"I know your ideals, and I grew attached to your prayers; that is why I am here now. You guided me. You gave me a life as someone more than just a puppet."

For that same ideal, she sacrificed herself. She had become a part of him that way. Such was the love which took the form of the woman Irisviel. If it was her . . . The man could permit it.

"There is need to grieve over me. I am already part of you. Enduring the pain of your own sundering would be enough."

" . . . So, what about her?"

The infant's body was light as plumage, yet a weight of different dimensions made the man's legs shiver. He could not understand yet. He was not prepared to understand how he would choose when that child was placed against his ideals.

Do not judge or forgive such a man's way of life. There is not the power for that yet. Even for such a pure life, the ideal was merciless. Without regard for the humility of one life, without regard to age, all were equally regarded—

"I am . . . not fit to hold her."

The man squeezed his dripping voice out, even as insanity threatened to crush its sweetness. A teardrop fell onto the plump, cherry-colored cheek of the baby in his arms. Sobbing silently, the man bent on one knee. To overthrow the world's heartlessness, he aspired to a greater heartlessness ... To the man who still had love, that was inflicting the final and greatest punishment.

The one he loved most—he would protect her, even if it meant the world's ruin. But the man understood. When the time came for his justice to demand the sacrifice of such an innocent life—what kind of decision would the man EMIYA KIRITSUGU make? Kiritsugu wept, fearful of the day that might come, frightened by that one-in-a-thousand chance.

Her arms warmly wrapped around Kiritsugu's chest, Irisviel raised her upper body from the bed, and gently placed her hand on the shoulder of her husband, who burst into tears.

"Never forget. Wasn't it your dream? To bring about a world where nobody would have to cry like that. Eight more years ... and your battle will be over. We will carry out this ideal. I'm sure the Grail will save you."

His wife, fully comprehending his agony, caught Kiritsugu's tears as kindly as she could.

"When that day is over, you must hold the child Ilyasviel once more. Stick your chest out like a father."

Three years ago

In occultism, theories of dimensions say there is a power not of this world.

To pinpoint the beginning of all happenings—that was the dearest wish of all magi. The Radix . . . The place of God, Akashic Records[1]; the beginning and end of all things, that recorded everything and created everything in this world.

Two hundred years ago, experiments on another place—not of this world—were put into motion. Einsbern, Makiri, Tousaka. Called the Three Families of the Beginning, what they designed was the reproduction of the Holy Grail—the subject of many traditions. With the expectation that the summoned Grail would realize any wish, the three families of magi offered their secret art to finally manifest the omnipotent vessel.

. . . However, that Grail could only grant the wish of one person. As soon as that truth was known, the bonds of cooperation were drenched in blood by conflict. That was the beginning of the War of the Holy Grail, Heaven's Feel.

Henceforth, once every sixty years, the Grail was summoned again in the far-East land of Fuyuki. The Grail then selects seven magi with the power to seize it, and divides a huge amount of prana[2] among them to make possible the summoning of Heroic

1 Akashic Records A reference to the Sanskrit concept of Akasha: aether. The Akashic Records is the recording of all things and happenings, and of all knowledge, inscribed in the Akasha/aether.

2 Prana A reference to the Sanskrit word "Prana." Life force, vital energy present in all things; here, that magic force includes both Od (Odic force) and Mana.

Spirits called Servants. A battle to the death decides who among the seven is most suitable to receive the Grail.

This summarized what KOTOMINE KIREI was undergoing.

"The patterns that have appeared on your right hand are called the Command Seals. They are proof that you were chosen by the Grail, and also the holy marks that grant you the right to control a Servant."

The person who explained all this with a smooth but carrying voice was TOUSAKA TOKIOMI. In the room of an elegant villa, built atop a small hill in the neatest district in South Turin, Italy, three men sat in a lounge chair—Kirei, Tokiomi, and the priest who had introduced them and mediated the conversation, KOTOMINE RISEI—Kirei's birth father.

As the friend of a priest who would soon be eighty, Tousaka was a rather eccentric Japanese. He seemed to be about the same age as Kirei, settled and emanating an expert aura. His family lineage was old and distinguished even by Japanese standards, and this villa was—in his own words—his secondary residence. Most interestingly, he casually declared himself a *magus*.

Being a magus was not as strange as it sounded. Kirei was a clergyman like his father, yet the duties of the father and son already differed greatly from what ordinary people would expect of a priest anyway.

The Holy Church that people like Kirei belonged to had a doctrine outside the bounds of miracles and divine mysteries, which served to exterminate the stigma of heresy and bury it into

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In this context, the author specifically uses *mana* to mean a natural force not in living things—as opposed to *od*—in his universe.

oblivion. That standpoint allowed them to supervise the blasphemy called magecraft.

Magi conspired only with other magi, and they were organized in a self-preserving group that called itself the Association, which presented a rival threat to the Holy Church. Presently, both sides had agreed to preserve a temporary peace. Even then, a state of affairs that would gather a priest from the Holy Church and a magus in the same building for a lecture was unthinkable. As for the priest, Risei, the Tousaka family was one to which the Church already had old connections, despite its status as a Magus house.

The night before, Kirei had discovered the surfacing pattern, shaped in three marks. He had then consulted his father, and Risei had immediately taken his son to Turin the next morning to meet that young magus. They greeted hurriedly, and Tokiomi proceeded to explain the situation concerning Heaven's Feel to Kirei in this secret meeting. The mark on Kirei's hand was the manifestation of Kirei's privilege—a chance at fulfilling his desire for a miracle, in the fourth recreation of the Holy Grail that was to happen three years later.

Not that he would have refused to fight. Kirei's duty in the Holy Church was, in essence, direct elimination of heresy—this implied that he was a full-fledged combatant. One could say it was his very duty to wager his life against a magus. The problem at hand was the contradiction inherent in having Kirei, a clergyman, participate as a magus in Heaven's Feel, a dispute between magi.

"Heaven's Feel is a battle which uses Servants as familiars. To sustain itself, elementary magic for their summoning is required. Essentially, the seven persons who are selected as Masters to the

Servants have to be magi. It must be exceptional for someone like you, who does not practise magecraft for a living, to be recognized by the Grail at such an early stage."

"Does the Grail have preferences in its selection?"

Tokiomi nodded to the still-unconvinced Kirei.

"I mentioned the Three Families of the Beginning. Among those favored in the granting of this privilege are magi from the houses of Einsbern, Tousaka and Makiri—now known as Matou. That also means that . . ."

Tokiomi lifted his right hand to show the threefold pattern.

"As the current head of the Tousaka family, I will participate in the next Heaven's Feel."

Was this man planning to cross arms with Kirei after having kindly guided him so thoroughly? Although Kirei could not comprehend it, he carried on with his numerous questions.

"I was wondering about the Servants you mentioned earlier. You said that Heroic Spirits were summoned and used as familiars . . ."

"It may be hard to believe, but that is the truth. That is one of the wonders of this Grail."

The legends of great men, supermen who had left their name in history and folklore—They are the ones who, after their deaths, remained in the memory of men; they were set apart from the category of mortals, and were promoted even in the spiritual realm; they were Heroic Spirits. They enjoy a status higher than the vengeful spirits or common evil spirits from nature that magi usually summoned as familiars. In a manner of speaking, a Heroic Spirit was an existence that enjoyed a spiritual status equal to a

god. Although a part of that power could be brought out and borrowed, it was unthinkable that they could be used as familiars in the present world.

"If you consider an act of such impossibility as proof of the power of the Grail, you would understand how outrageous a treasure it is. Even the summoning of a Servant is but a mere fragment of the Grail's power."

Tousaka Tokiomi sighed deeply and shook his head, seemingly dumbfounded by his own words.

"Heroic Spirits who lived no more than a century ago, after the ancient age of gods, can be summoned. Seven Heroic Spirits follow seven Masters; each protects his or her own Master, and attempts to exterminate the enemy Masters. Heroes from any era and any country may be summoned in the present era, and they face off in a deadly competition for supremacy. That is the Holy Grail War of Fuyuki—Heaven's Feel."

" . . . Such a monstrosity . . . occurring in a place inhabited by thousands of citizens?"

By consensus, magi conceal themselves; it was the only way to exist in an era where science was believed to be the universal truth. With the Holy Church as an additional consideration, revealing their existence was definitely not an option. However, with a Heroic Spirit in tow, one would also have to conceal a source of power capable of causing catastrophic disaster. Bringing seven Servants together in the present era, in a conflict between humans, and having them clash in battle . . . That was practically ordering a large-scale slaughter.

"—Of course, it is implicit that the confrontation must be held in secret. You will need well-prepared supervision to ensure that."

Having remained silent until then, Kirei's father, the priest Risei, came forward and voiced his part.

"Heaven's Feel happens once every sixty years; this will be the fourth time it has occurred. The civilization of Japan had already begun when the second war occurred. Even in the most remote regions, we cannot overlook the possibility of people witnessing the spread of serious damage.

Thus, since the third Heaven's Feel, an agreement had been made; the Holy Church would dispatch a supervisor. To minimize disaster from the War, we must conceal its existence and have the magi comply in keeping the feud a secret."

"Does the Church serve as a referee in a conflict between magi?"

"Precisely because it is a conflict between magi. Because of the political complications, nobody in the Magus Association is fit to referee. There simply is no other way but to delegate it to an external authority such as the Church.

"Furthermore, the Holy Church would not let the name of the Holy Grail be used lightly. We cannot ignore the possibility that it really is the cup that received the blood of the son of God, either."

Kirei and Risei, father and son, both belonged to the Assembly of the Eighth Sacrament. The recovery of holy relics numbered among their duties. The treasure called the Holy Grail had appeared in many tales and legends, and it was of particular importance in the Church's doctrine.

"During the third Heaven's Feel, in the chaos of the World War, a meeting was held under similar conditions. I, still a youngster then, was appointed to an important task. For the next battle, I would proceed to the land of Fuyuki to watch over your fight."

At his father's words, Kirei tilted his head.

"Hold on. Isn't the chosen Church supervisor expected to be fair? It is a problem if one of the participants is related by blood . . ."

"Now, now. You think this is a blind spot overlooked by the rules?"

The unusual smile of the stubborn father implied something that Kirei could not read.

"Kotomine, you should not trouble your son. Let us move on to the real question."

Tousaka Tokiomi quickly urged the old priest to the point.

"Hm, right—Kirei, so far we have only explained the outward aspects of the Grail War. There is another reason I had you meet Mr. Tousaka today."

" . . . Which is?"

"To tell the truth, since some time ago we have had positive proof that the Grail which appeared in Fuyuki was a different one from the holy relic of the son of God. In the end, this battle of Heaven's Feel in Fuyuki is being fought only for a mere copy of the omnipotent vessel, one that opens a way to a utopia. It is in no way related to our Church."

That was how things were. Otherwise, the Holy Church would not be content merely with the role of a silent supervisor. If the

Grail turned out to be an actual Holy Relic, the Church would bypass the ceasefire agreement and plunder it off the hands of the magi.

"If a chalice is only a means to reach the Akashic Records, it is not the concern of our Holy Church. After all, the craving of magi to find Akasha, the origin, does not necessarily conflict with our doctrine.

"—However, for us to permit it being left alone, it has to fall into the hands of someone strong. If an unwelcome fellow managed to get his hands on it, we don't know what kind of accident might be caused."

"Then, if we eliminate it as a heresy—"

"That would still be difficult. The magi who yearn for the Grail have an uncommon tenacity. If we conducted a frontal trial, conflict with the Magus Association would be inevitable. That would create too many victims.

"Rather, as a second-best plan, finding a way to entrust it to a 'preferred party' would be most interesting."

Kirei was gradually catching up to the true motive of this interview. His father was mingling with Tousaka Tokiomi, a magus, after all. Tousaka Tokiomi nodded and resumed.

"Reaching the Akasha; there is no greater purpose to us Tousaka than that. Sadly, the Einsberns and Matous, who once shared the same motive, have lost themselves to more worldly concerns, and have now forgotten their original intention completely. I will not even mention how they have invited four Masters from outside. They want the Grail for their despicable lust and nothing else."

That would mean that the Holy Church would approve no one else but Tousaka Tokiomi as the Grail's bearer. Kirei slowly started to understand more and more about his assignment.

"So you would like me to participate in the next Grail War to let Mr. Tousaka Tokiomi win?"

"Exactly."

Finally, Tousaka Tokiomi revealed the first sign of a smile.

"Of course, we will stealthily join forces against the five remaining Masters and annihilate them to increase our chances at victory."

At Tokiomi's words, Father Risei gave an austere nod. The neutrality of the Holy Church as a referee was already turning into a farce. This Heaven's Feel must be interesting, in contrast to the Church's original expectations.

Kirei found this turn of events neither right nor wrong. If the intentions of the Church were clear, there was only the fulfilling of his task as a devoted executor.

"Kirei, you will be transferred from the Holy Church to the Magus Association, and you will become my apprentice."

Without a break, and in a pragmatic tone, Tousaka Tokiomi hastened his explanations.

"A—transfer?"

"The exchange has already been made formal, Kirei."

At this, Father Risei took out a letter. It was a notification with the joint signatures of the Holy Church and the Magus Association, addressed to Kotomine Kirei. Kirei was more than surprised at the merit of the performance: in the short time frame

between yesterday and today, the letter had been taken care of posthaste.

Kirei had no real reason to act up in the matter, nor did he have any reason for taking offense at the discussion; he had no purpose at all.

"Our most important priority now is to have you do nothing but practice magecraft in my house in Japan. The next Heaven's Feel is in three years. By then, you must have a Servant who will obey you, and you must become a magus who will participate in the battle as a Master."

"But—is it all right? If I openly study under you, will there not be suspicion of our cooperation?"

Tokiomi gave a cold-hearted smile and shook his head.

"You don't know magi. In our world, if a teacher and his student encounter a conflict of interest, it is perfectly normal for it to end in a battle to the death."

"Ah, I see."

Though Kirei did not mean to understand magi, he had a good grasp of the tendencies of this clan known as magi. As an executor, he had had countless encounters with heretical magi. With his own hands, he had taken down at least twenty or more of them.

"So, do you have other questions?"

In response to Tokiomi's request for a conclusion, Kirei asked the question he had all along.

"Just one. The Grail that selects the Masters; what exactly is its purpose?"

Apparently that was not a question Tokiomi expected. The magus's eyebrows gathered in a wrinkle for a short while before he gave a relaxed reply.

"The Grail will . . . Of course, it will preferably select Masters who sincerely need it. As I said earlier, we Tousaka will be included at the top of that list as one of the original three families."

"So all of the Masters have a reason to want the Grail?"

"It is not limited only to that. The Grail requires seven persons to show up. If an insufficient number turn up at the present time, irregular people who would normally not be chosen can also carry Command Seals. There might have been such a case in the past, but—ah, I see."

While speaking, Tokiomi seemed to realize Kirei's suspicion.

"Kirei, you think your selection by the Grail was a mistake, don't you?"

Kirei nodded. No matter how hard one searched, one could find no reason for a wishing machine to notice him.

"Hm, it certainly is odd. The only thing that would link you to the Grail would be your father, who was appointed as supervisor, but . . . No, you could think that is the very reason."

" . . . Which means?"

"The Grail might have already anticipated that the Holy Church would support the Tousaka family. Thus, an executor of the Church who could acquire Command Seals would support the Tousaka."

With those words, Tokiomi, satisfied and wishing to end the discussion, added.

"In other words, the Grail is giving me, a Tousaka, two shares of command Seals. For that, it chose you as a Master. How about it? Does this explanation satisfy you?"

He delivered this conclusion daringly.

"..."

Such arrogant confidence suited the man Tousaka Tokiomi. His dignity bordered on obnoxiousness. Certainly, as a magus he was a man of excellence; his self-confidence was born from that excellence. He probably never doubted his own judgment. You would never get any other answer from Tokiomi here and now—Kirei concluded thus.

"When do we go to Japan?"

Hiding his inner discouragement, Kirei changed the subject.

"I will visit Great Britain for a bit. I have a small task to do at Clock Tower. You will go to Japan a step ahead of me. I will tell my family."

"Understood. I will go at once."

"Kirei, go ahead first. I need to discuss something with Mr. Tousaka."

Nodding at his father's words, Kirei stood up from his seat, and with a silent bow, left alone.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Remaining in the room, Tousaka Tokiomi and Father Risei silently watched as Kotomine Kirei left.

"That's a reliable son you have, Kotomine."

"His strength as an Executor is guaranteed. None of his colleagues were as studious as he during training. I'm the one you should be doubting."

"Ho! Is that the exemplary attitude of a defender of the faith?"

"Oh, it shames me to say it, but this Kirei is the only pride of a senile old fool like me."

The old priest was known for his rigor, but feeling at ease with Tokiomi, he smiled. As his eyes turned to his only son, his trust and love showed clearly.

"Still childless past the age of fifty, I had given up on a heir . . . But now, I am amazed at how far my son has come."

"Though, he agreed more easily than I thought, didn't he?"

"My son would jump in a fire if that was the will of the Church. That's how far he would go for his faith."

Tokiomi did not mean to doubt the words of the old priest, but his impression of the faith demonstrated by Father Risei's son was not quite that of passion. The quiet appearance of the man called Kirei felt more nihilistic to him.

"To be honest, that was disappointing. No matter how I look at him, it seems to me that what he had gotten involved in is of no concern to him."

"No . . . This might really be his salvation."

Father Risei, looking gloomy, muttered ambiguously.

"To share a private matter, his wife died a few days ago. They hadn't been married for even two years."

"Oh, I—"

Met with this unexpected circumstance, Tokiomi was at loss for words.

"Though he does not show it—he seemed to endure it fairly well—he has too many memories in Italy. Maybe, for Kirei right now, returning to his old fatherland for a new mission could help heal his wounds."

Risei sighed at those words while Tokiomi gazed straight at him.

"Tokiomi-kun, does not one's true worth show as his hardship increases?"

Tokiomi deeply bowed at the old priest's words.

"I am obliged. My debt to the Holy Church and both generations of the Kotomine family will be carved as a family precept."

"Not at all. I am only fulfilling my oath for the future generation of Tousaka. The rest is only praying for God's protection until your journey takes you to the Radix."

"Yes. My grandfather's regrets, the dearest wish of the Tousaka, this is what my whole life has ever been for."

Hiding the suffocation his self-confidence endured from the weight of his responsibilities, Tokiomi nodded resolutely.

"This year, I will reach the Grail. I will make sure of that."

At Tokiomi's display of dignity, Father Risei blessed the memory of his late friend.

"My friend . . . You too have a good heir."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The wind of the Mediterranean sea rustled his hair. Kotomine Kirei returned from the villa atop the hill, alone and silent on the narrow winding path.

Now, in his mind, Kirei ordered his many impressions of the man Tousaka Tokiomi, whom he had just met. Perhaps he had led a hard life. He was endowed with a firm dignity he could rightfully boast about, a pride that seemed to come from from experienced hardship. He understood that personality quite well. Kirei's own father was the same sort of person.

They were men who had defined the meaning behind their own birth and existence, and followed it without any doubt. They never wavered, and they never hesitated. Forged into an iron will with a clear objective, vectorized only by the fulfillment of something—that was their lifelong goal, in all aspects of their life. The form of this conviction could be, in the case of Kirei's father, a pious faith; in Tousaka Tokiomi's case, perhaps it was the self-confidence of one who was chosen—a privilege not for the plebeians—and the self-consciousness of one with a responsibility to shoulder. He was one of the few remaining genuine aristocrats, hardly found these days.

From that point on, Tousaka Tokiomi's existence would probably hold important implications for Kirei . . . Even so, he and Kirei were incompatible. Tokiomi was essentially similar to his father.

Those who saw only their own ideals could never understand the pain of those unable to have one. People like Tokiomi had a sense of purpose at the base of their convictions, but such a thing

was totally absent in Kotomine Kirei's mind. Not once in over twenty years had he ever felt such a sensation.

By such judgment, he could not consider the most noble idea, could not have comfort in any quest, could not find rest in any pleasure. Such a man could not have anything like a sense of purpose in the first place. He could not understand how he had become so far removed from the world's values. Kirei could not even find a passion to throw himself into.

He still believed there was a God, a supreme existence, although he had not the maturity to perceive it. He lived believing that one day, the holiest word of God would lead him to the supreme truth and save him; he lived betting on that hope, clinging onto it. But deep in his heart, he already knew—that salvation for a man like him could no longer come from the love of God.

Confronted with such anger and despair, he was driven to masochism. Under the pretense of penance for moral training, he wounded himself repeatedly. But those tortures forged Kirei's body like iron. Before he realized it, he had risen to the top of the elite of the Holy Church, as an Executor, a position few could follow him to.

Glory in the eyes of others; Kotomine Kirei's self-control and devotion were praised as a model for the clergy by all. His father, Risei, was no exception. Kirei understood very well why Kotomine Risei had so much faith and admiration for him, his own son, but that was a gross misunderstanding. In reality, his

heart was shameful. Amending this misunderstanding would probably take longer than a whole lifetime.

To this day, no one understood how much Kirei lacked. Yes, not even the only woman he loved—

Feeling lightheaded, Kirei lightened his pace and put his hand to his forehead. As he tried to remember his late wife, diffuse thoughts scattered and were lost in a rising mist. His mind before a precipice in heavy fog, survival instinct told him not to take a single mental step forward.

Before he realized it, he had arrived at the bottom of the hill. Kirei stopped and looked back at the faraway villa at the top. He still had not reached a satisfactory conclusion in his interview with Tousaka Tokiomi ... That problem was of greatest concern to him.

Why had a miraculous power like the Grail chosen Kotomine Kirei? Tokiomi's explanation was a desperate one. If the Grail sought a supporter for Tokiomi, there were many capable people who were worthy friends; Kirei was not the only one. There must have been a reason to his selection for the next Grail's appearance.

Yet ... The more he thought, the more Kirei found the inconsistency worrying. He essentially had no sense of purpose, nor any ideal or aspiration. From any perspective, he had no reason to be the bearer of a miracle like an "almighty wish-granting machine."

With a gloomy face, Kirei looked at the three symbols that had appeared on the back of his right hand. They said the Command Seals were a holy mark. Three years from now, would he find a pledge to carry?

One year ago

He immediately recognized the woman he was looking for.

In the early holiday afternoon, bathed in the peaceful light of early autumn, you could see children playing on the lawn, their parents watching over them, smiling. The plaza around the fountain of the park was overcrowded with townspeople who had brought their families to relax.

Even in such a crowd, he did not lose his track. No matter how crowded, no matter how far, he was certain he could find her effortlessly—even if his chance of meeting her once a month was uncertain, even if she already had a partner.

Only when he walked up to her did the woman in the tree shade notice his arrival.

"—Hey, I haven't seen you in a long time."

"Oh—Kariya-kun."

Smiling modestly and courteously, she lifted her eyes from her book. She was worn out. Seeing her like that, Matou Kariya was seized with a helpless anxiety. Something seemed to be tormenting her.

He immediately inquired about it, hoping to do all he could to solve the matter whatever it may be. Although touched by the gesture, it was something she could not discuss with Kariya. He was not so close that he could devote such unreserved kindness; it was not his place to do so.

"It's been three months. The trip was pretty long this time."

"Ah . . . Eh, yes."

Her smile appeared in his sweet dreams, but standing before her, he could not find the courage to look her in the eye. It had been that way for the past eight years. Kariya would probably never be able to face that smile in the coming years either. She made him so nervous that he never knew what to talk about after the initial greeting; his mind drew a blank. That, too, happened every time.

Kariya looked for the one he could talk to easily, to break the awkward silence—there she was, playing on the grass among the other kids, her two ponytails dancing about happily. Though still very young, the girl already displayed traits of her mother's beautiful face.

"Rin-chan."

Kariya called, waving a hand. As soon as she noticed, Rin rushed toward him with a bright smile.

"Welcome back, uncle Kariya! Did you bring me another present?"

"Now, Rin, watch your manners . . ."

The young girl was oblivious to her mother's embarrassment. Rin's eyes shone with expectation, and Kariya, responding with a mirrored smile, held out one of the two presents he carried behind his back.

"Waah, beautiful . . ."

An elaborate brooch of various-sized glass beads captured the girl's heart at first sight. It was a bit too fancy for a girl of her age, but Kariya was well aware of Rin's precocious tastes.

"As always, thank you Uncle. I will take care of it."

"Haha! If you like it, Uncle is happy too."

Gently stroking Rin's head, Kariya looked for the other present's intended recipient. She was nowhere to be found in the park.

"Say, where's Sakura-chan?"

Rin's smile vanished immediately. All thought seemed to cease on the face of the child, resigned to a reality she was forced to accept mindlessly.

"Sakura. She's . . . already gone."

Blankly, Rin reply in monotone. Avoiding Kariya's questions, she ran back to the kids she was playing with earlier.

"..."

Bewildered by Rin's incomprehensible words, Kariya looked at Rin's mother questioningly, then with sudden realization. She turned her eyes away, looking gloomily at empty space.

"What does that mean . . .?"

"Sakura is neither my daughter, nor Rin's sister, anymore."

Her tone was dry, but more courageous than Rin's.

"She has gone to the Matou family."

Matou—The name, at once deeply familiar and abominable, violently ripped at Kariya's heart.

"That can't . . . What the hell does that mean, Aoi?!"

"You shouldn't even need to ask, right? You of all people, Kariya."

Rin's mother, Tousaka Aoi, returned the harsh, cold-hearted reply with indifference, never looking at him. Kariya's heart was crushed.

"You of all people should know why the Matous need a child of wizard ancestry to succeed them, shouldn't you?"

"How . . . could you . . . accept that?"

"That was what he decided. It was the decision of the Tousaka family head, acceding to a request from their old, sworn friends, the Matous . . . My opinion does not matter."

For that reason, mother and child, older sister and younger sister, were forcefully separated. Of course she would not agree. But Aoi—and even the young Rin—understood well why they could do nothing but accept it. That was what it was like to live as a magus. Kariya knew that cruel fate all too well.

". . . Are you fine with it?"

Aoi replied Kariya's stony voice with a feeble, bitter smile.

"When I decided to marry into the Tousaka family, when I decided to become the wife of a magus, I was prepared for something like this. For one belonging to a wizard's bloodline, seeking the happiness of a normal family is a mistake."

Facing Kariya as he tried to speak again, the magus wife gently but firmly stopped him—"This matter is between the Tousakas and the Matous. It does not concern you, who turned your back on the world of magi." She finished with a slight nod.

With this, Kariya could not move. His chest choked from weakness and helplessness, like one of the park's trees.

Since a long ago, when she was a girl, then when she became a wife, and even after she had two children, Aoi's attitude toward Kariya had never changed. Three years older than him, and a friend since their infancy, she had always attended to Kariya, kindly and without constraint, like a real sister to a brother. This was the first time she had pointed out their respective positions so clearly.

"If you ever get to see Sakura, please treat her kindly. She has always been fond of you, Kariya."

Aoi watched over Rin, who was playing brightly and full of energy, trying to chase her grief away. She showed him only the profile of a peaceful mother on holiday. Rin's behavior seemed to reply on their behalf, pushing the speechless Kariya beside her.

But Kariya did not miss it. There was no way he could miss it. The firm, serene Tousaka Aoi, who had accepted her fate—even she could not completely conceal the tears gathering at the corner of her eyes.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kariya hastened through the scenery of the hometown he thought he would never see again. Each time he returned to the city of Fuyuki, he never crossed the bridge to Miyama town.

It must have been ten years since then. Unlike the Shinto area where business went on everyday, nothing had changed in this neighborhood where time seemed to stop. Quiet streets were filled with memories, but no pleasant ones would come to mind if he stopped to look. Ignoring worthless nostalgia, Kariya ruminated over his dialogue with Aoi from an hour ago.

"... Are you fine with it?"

The thoughtless reprieve Aoi threw at him as she turned her eyes away. He had not used such a sharp tone for several years.

Raise not your eyes, be not a bother. That was how he had lived. Anger, hatred—Having left it all behind in the desolate streets of his hometown Miyama, Kariya never made a fuss over

anything. Even the foulest, ugliest matters were nothing compared to the things he hated in this land.

It must have been eight years since his voice last harbored such feelings. That time—had he not used the same tone, the same words, with the same woman?

"Are you fine with it?" He had shot the same question then. Turning to his childhood friend, the night before she took the name Tousaka.

He never forgot her expression at that time. She had given a small nod, seemingly sorry and apologetic, blushing shyly. Kariya had been defeated by that quiet smile.

"... I was prepared. It was a mistake to seek the normal happiness of a family ..." Those words were a lie.

That day eight years ago, when she was proposed to by the young magus, her smile definitely showed her faith in happiness. Kariya fully accepted his defeat because he trusted that smile. Perhaps only Aoi's fiancé could make her happy.

That was a mistake. He, of all people, should have realized that fatal mistake. Had he not rejected his fate and left his family because he fully realized how despicable magecraft was?

He could still forgive himself for that. But he, who had turned his back in fear, who was well aware of how abominable magecraft was, could not forgive one thing—his woman had surrendered to one of those hated magi.

Kariya's chest burned in regret. He had chosen the wrong words, not once, but twice. His words should not have been "are you fine with it?", but rather, "you must not do that."

Eight years ago, if he had restrained Aoi, there might have been a different future. If she had not bound herself to Tousaka that day, she would have been lifted from the cursed doom of a magus, and could have led a normal life.

If he had reacted differently today, to the decision between the Tousakas and the Matous, it would probably have shocked her. She would likely reject the nonsense of an outsider.

Even so, she should not blame only herself. She should not need to suppress her tears completely. Kariya could not forgive himself for repeating the same mistake. As punishment, he would return to the place he had left behind. Certainly, there would be some way to atone *there*—the world he once turned his back to, the fate he clumsily escaped.

But now, he could confront that, if he thought of the only woman in the world he did not want to grieve—

Under the sky of the nearing twilight, he stopped in front of a towering, luxuriant western-styled house. After ten years, Matou Kariya stood before the gate of his home once again.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Starting at the front door inside the Matou residence, where Kariya settled on a sofa in the drawing room, a small but risky dispute soon broke out.

"I thought I told you never to show yourself before me again."

Sitting facing Kariya, the small, old man who spat the detestable words was Matou Zouken, the head of the family. He was so withered that his bald head and limbs made him look

mummified, yet a light deep in his eyes filled his spirit; both his appearance and personality made him an uncommon, mysterious person.

Truthfully, not even Kariya could determine the old man's exact age. The aberrant entry in the family register showed he was the brother of Kariya's father. But since the time of his great-grandfather—his ancestor in the third generation—there were records of an old man named Zouken in the family tree. There was no way to find out how many generations this man had reigned over in the Matou family.

He was a magus who could be considered immortal, having stretched his lifespan again and again, a person at the root of the Matou bloodline with little direct connection with Kariya. He was a genuine specter still surviving in the current era.

"I caught wind of something inexcusable. About how the house of Matou was disgracing itself in outrageous manner."

Kariya readily admitted that the magus he now faced was powerful and unequaled in cruelty. Here was a man who was the personification of everything Kariya had come to hate, despise, and scorn throughout his existence. If that man were to kill him, Kariya would sorely hate him at his life's end. Ten years ago, Kariya had faced that strong spirit and escaped the Matous, thus earning his freedom.

"I heard you took in the Tousakas' second daughter. Do you want to preserve the Matou lineage of magi so badly?"

Zouken scowled at the provocative tone of Kariya's inquiry.

"Do you want to talk about it? Nothing else to say? Who do you think is responsible for the downfall of the Matous?

Byakuya's son turned out to be devoid of Magic Circuits. The pure-blooded Matou line has collapsed with this generation. But you are one who has the basis of a magus, Kariya, more than your big brother Byakuya did. If you had obediently accepted your heritage and inherited the secrets of the Matous, we'd not be pressed by circumstances. This is all yours . . ."

Kariya snorted, deflecting the threatening attitude of the old man who was getting fired up, and foaming at the mouth.

"Stop this comedy you vampire. What's the big deal about preserving the Matou family line? Don't make me laugh! Nothing would happen to you even if there is no new Matou heir. This discussion is pointless; you will continue to live for another two hundred years, or even a thousand years, eh?"

Zouken gave a leery smile, as though his anger up to now was a lie. Kariya had guessed correctly. That was the smile of a monster that treated human emotions as mere splinters.

"As always, you are a loveless fellow. You speak and behave frankly."

"Whatever. That's how you trained me. I'm not one to beat around the bush."

A wet sound came out of the depths of the old man's throat; he seemed to be laughing pleasantly.

"That's right. You will probably outlive me in the distant future, longer than Byakuya's son would. Still, it is a question of how long I can guard this body against its inevitable rotting. Even if a Matou heir is not needed, a Matou magus is required. To obtain the Grail, that is."

". . . In the end, that's what your goal is?"

Kariya's guess went well. It was immortality that this old magus was firmly chasing after.

The wishing-machine called the Grail could fulfill that once it was completed. What was choking this monster, refusing to die even after centuries, was the hope in this miracle.

"Next year marks the end of the sixty-year cycle. But in the fourth Heaven's Feel, there will be no player from the Matous. Byakuya does not have a prana level high enough to summon a Servant. He does not have the Command Seals. But even if we must desist in this battle, we still stand a chance at the next one sixty years later. There is no doubt that an excellent magecraft user can be born from the Tousakas' daughter. I expect great things from this one; she will be a good vessel."

The face of Tousaka Sakura appeared on Kariya's eyelids. A late bloomer, always behind her sister Rin; a frail-looking girl. A child far too young to bear the cruel fate of a magus.

Swallowing his seething rage, Kariya feigned a calm attitude. Right here and now, he was negotiating with Zouken. There was nothing to gain from being emotional.

"If that's all there is to it, if you want the Grail, there's no need to involve Tousaka Sakura, right?"

Zouken's eyes narrowed, suspicious of the hidden meaning in Kariya's words.

"You . . . What trick do you have in mind?"

"A deal, Matou Zouken. I will bring the Matous' name to the next Heaven's Feel, and you will release Tousaka Sakura."

Taken aback only long enough to draw a breath, Zouken sniggered scornfully.

"*Kha*, don't be stupid. Could a failure who never studied anything be the Master of a Servant in just one year?"

"You have the secret to make it possible, don't you? Put those worm-using skills you're so proud of to use, old man."

Kariya went straight to the point, staring head-on into the eyes of the old magus.

"Plant your Crest worms in me. You can do that to the flesh and blood of the filthy Matous. Compatibility should be far better than with a daughter of another family."

Zouken's humanistic expression changed, and he was a magus again, betraying no emotion.

"Kariya—do you want to die?"

"Don't tell me you're worried, 'Uncle'?"

Realizing that Kariya was serious, Zouken coldly evaluated Kariya, gazing at him, and then took a deep breath.

"I had always hoped to see more from you than from Byakuya. If we expand your Magic Circuits with the Crest worms and train you thoroughly for a year, there's a chance the Grail will select you. . . . Still, I don't understand. Why would you go so far for a little girl?"

"Let the Matous' tenacity be carried by Matou hands. Outsiders should not be involved."

"Again with your admirable dedication."

Zouken displayed a complacent smile, full of his evil disposition. He seemed to be enjoying it.

"But Kariya, if your purpose is to not get anybody involved, aren't you a little late? Do you know how many days it has been since the daughter of Tousaka came to our family?"

Despair rushed in, crushing Kariya's chest.

"Old man, you mean—"

"There were terrible cries for the first three days, but she was silent by the fourth day. Today, she was thrown into the worm storage at dawn to see how long she would last, but, *ho ho*, she endured it for half a day and still breathes. What do you know? Tousaka material certainly isn't defective."

Kariya's shoulders shivered with murderous intent, provoked by something greater than hatred. He wanted to seize this evil magus by the neck, strangle him with all his strength and break it off, right this instant—the impulse raged madly inside Kariya.

But Kariya accepted it. Even though he was thin to the point of withering, Zouken was a magus. Kariya could not possibly kill him off right here; he did not have even a fraction of the power required to do that. To save Sakura, there was no other way but negotiation. Seeing through Kariya's self-conflict, Zouken let out a satisfied, gloomy chuckle.

"So, what will you do? The little girl is already broken, filled from head to toe with the worms. But if you still want to save her, well, I won't think twice."

"... I have no objection. Let's do it."

Kariya replied in a chilling voice. Of course, he had no other choice.

"Excellent, excellent. Well, we can still train you as much as possible. But know that I will continue Sakura's training if you do not make any progress."

He cackled gleefully. The good mood of the old magus was making a fool of Kariya and his rage and despair.

"Rather than reinstating a failure who betrayed us, the success rate with a child is far higher. I favor getting the best out of each opportunity as it comes along. I am giving up on Heaven's Feel this time, since I already consider it a lost battle. But in the one-in-a-million chance that you did manage to obtain the Grail—I agree. If that happens, naturally I would have no business with Tousaka's daughter, having accomplished the one thing I am training her for."

"... You're not double-dealing, are you? Matou Zouken?"

"Kariya, if you think you need to be five-faced to face me, try enduring the Crest worms first. Yes, try nursing the worms with your body for a week first. If you haven't died of insanity by then, I will take it that you are indeed serious."

Leaning on his cane and straightening his back with difficulty, Zouken turned toward Kariya, wearing an alien smile that fully displayed his wickedness.

"Then, let us begin the preparations without delay. We will finish the treatment immediately. If you want to reconsider, do it right now."

Nodding silently, Kariya discarded all final hesitation. Once he let the worms inside his body, he would be Zouken's puppet. There would be no way to rebel against the old magus. If he could even qualify as a magus, Kariya and his Matou blood would definitely receive the Command Seals.

Heaven's Feel—the only chance of salvation for Tousaka Sakura; a choice he would never be able to reach with this flesh and blood. He might lose his life in this exchange. Even if he did not get taken down by the other Masters, his flesh would be

devoured by the worms as he raised them—even for only a year—and he would not have more than a few years to live.

But that did not matter. His decision had come too late. Had he showed the same determination ten years ago, Aoi's child would be living peacefully with her mother. The fate he refused had been passed around, and had fallen on a blameless girl. There was no redemption for that. If there was a path to atonement, it could only be through returning the girl's life to normalcy.

In addition, if he had to completely wipe out the remaining six Masters to reach the Grail . . . Among those who brought tragedy to the girl named Sakura, there was at least one person he could bring a requiem to.

"Tousaka Tokiomi . . ."

As the head of one of the Three Families of the Beginning, there was no doubt that he would bear the Command Seals.

A dwelling hatred had been building up to this day, one unlike his sense of crime toward Aoi, and his hatred toward Zouken. A dark feeling of revenge had quietly started to burn, like a banked fire, in the depths of Matou Kariya's heart.

Act 1

– 285:42:56

Nobody had ever understood Waver Velvet's talent.

As a magus, he was neither born of famous lineage, nor lucky enough to have met a good master. The youth's education was largely self-taught, and he was finally fortunate enough to be accepted by the Magus Association, which controlled magi across the world, into its headquarters—the London educational institution known as Clock Tower. Waver believed without a doubt that this cause was incomparably honorable, and was also very proud of his own talent. "I am the most capable student of Clock Tower since its founding. Everyone would have to respect me." At least, that was what Waver thought of himself.

In truth, the magus lineage of the Velvets only stretched three generations. Waver's Crest concentration and Magic Circuit quantity paled in comparison to those from well-established magi families. With each generation, the number of Magic Circuits and concentration of Crests constantly increased and expanded. In Clock Tower, many of the students who had received scholarships

came from families with more than six generations of pure magi blood.

The wonders of magecraft could not be taught to completion within one generation. The results of a lifetime's research by the parents are passed on to their children; only in this way could magecraft become increasingly refined. For this reason, those with a longer magus lineage tended to have stronger prana.

Furthermore, although the quantity of a magi's Magic Circuits were already determined at birth, there were some ancestral magi families that deliberately contrived to increase the amount of Magic Circuits in their offspring, hoping to distance themselves from newer Magi families. Advantages within the world of magecraft could then be predetermined even before birth. This was a commonly accepted point of view.

Waver did not see it that way. Differences in ancestry could be compensated by building one's experience. Even without exceptionally developed Magic Circuits, the difference in quality at birth could be bridged by a deep understanding and skilled utilization of magecraft. Waver had always deeply believed that. He believed himself to be an excellent example of that, and strove to show off his abilities.

But reality was too cruel for such an ideal. Students who boasted about their ancestral bloodline, and students who endlessly pursued and flattered these students from ancestral bloodlines—they comprised the mainstay of Clock Tower, and determined its workings. The lecturers were no exception, expectant only of students from famous lineages. To a pauper-

researcher like Waver, they were reluctant even to let him into the library to browse its tomes, let alone teach him magecraft.

Why should expectations of a magus's future depend on his lineage? Why should a theory's credibility depend on the experience associated with one's lineage? Nobody cared about Waver's questions. The lecturers tricked Waver with verbal flourishes when he presented his research thesis, then acted as though Waver had been convinced otherwise, laughing it off and ignoring it. It truly was unbelievable. This anxiety drove Waver to take action.

To expose the Magus Association's corrupt system, Waver wrote an exposition. It was titled *An Inquiry of Magecraft's Path In the New Century*, the result of three years of conceptualization and a year's writing. Viciously attacking traditional views, the painstakingly written exposition showed clear and intense thought, without a single flaw. If seen by the Inquisitors, it would definitely cause much unrest.

But—the lecturer from the Department of Eulyphis tossed it out after casually reading through it just once.

His name was Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald. He was the heir of the Archibald family with a magus lineage nine generations long, a popular man whom everyone addressed as Lord El-Melloi. Engaged to the daughter of the principal; a lecturer at such a young age; he was the best of the best. He was also representative of the authority that Waver despised.

"A man given to delusions, such as you, is not suited to research, Waver." Lecturer Kayneth said in a condescending manner, without a shred of pity in his voice. Kayneth's ice cold

gaze was a sight Waver would never forget. In the nineteen years of Waver's life, he had never been humiliated in worse fashion.

Since he had the talent to be a lecturer, it was impossible for him not to comprehend Waver's exceptional exposition. No, that man was probably jealous precisely because he understood. Afraid of Waver's hidden talent, he had grown jealous, and treated Waver as a threat to his own position. That was probably why he responded in such a violent manner upon reading Waver's exposition. Ripping an exposition of gathered wisdom; is this the attitude a scholar should assume?

Unforgivable. His world-shaking talent had been arbitrarily written off by a figure of authority; there was no justice. But not a single person sympathized with Waver's frustration. The Magus Association was—from Waver's point of view—already corrupt to the core.

But . . . while putting up with these infinitely frustrating days, Waver heard a rumor. It was whispered that the reputed Lord El-Melloi, in the hope of adding another entry to his résumé for vanity's sake, had decided to join a nearby magecraft competition in the far East.

Waver began researching the details of this Heaven's Feel overnight, and was deeply mesmerized by the horrific details.

The wish-granting Holy Grail, holding a huge amount of hidden prana at stake, summoned Heroic Spirits into the present world and commanded them as familiars, initiating a death match. Title, authority; everything was of little value in the face of such a reward. The competition relied purely on true skill. The details were a little barbaric, but it was a simple yet fair method of

judging superiority. For an unrecognized genius, this was an excellent opportunity, an ideal stage to exhibit himself. Lady Luck had finally smiled on the excited Waver.

It began with the financial department's negligence. Waver was tasked to deliver, along with other normal parcels, a holy relic that Lecturer Kayneth had requested from Macedonia, even though it was a parcel to be opened only when Kayneth himself was present. Waver immediately realized that it was a catalyst used to summon Servants in Heaven's Feel. And thus, he received a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

He no longer had even a shred of love left for the corrupt Clock Tower. The glory of graduating as a valedictorian was mere chaff compared to the honor brought by Fuyuki's Holy Grail. The moment of Waver Velvet's victory in the war would be the same moment when those insignificant members of the Magus Association grovel at his feet.

From that day on, Waver left England, heading for the island country in the far East. Clock Tower immediately realized who had stolen Kayneth's parcel, but did not chase after him. No one was aware of his interest in Heaven's Feel.

But there was something Waver did not know. Everyone thought that he had done no more than hide Kayneth's relic in rage. No one thought he would risk his life knowingly to participate in a magecraft competition. Clock Tower had really underestimated Waver.

In the far East village, at the place that decided his destiny—Fuyuki City, Waver was hiding under the blanket of his bed, trying desperately to hold back peals of laughter. No, it was impossible to hold it back. Illuminated by the dim sunlight coming through the cracks of the curtain, he raised his right hand every few seconds, letting out some muffled laughter.

With the relic in his hands, himself in Fuyuki, and he a qualified magus ... How could the Grail turn a blind eye to someone like that? Indeed, the patterns of the three-fold Command Seals had materialized clearly on Waver's right hand last night—proof of a Master who could summon a Servant. Even the ruckus made by the roosters in the courtyard as dawn drew near went unnoticed.

"Waver, breakfast time."

The voice of the old woman calling him on the stairs sounded different this morning; it was less annoying. Wishing to begin that memorable day safely, Waver quickly began changing.

Although a backwater place for an island nation, Fuyuki City saw a lot of tourists from other places. Thanks to that, Waver's appearance, though obviously different from that of a Japanese, did not attract too much attention. Even so, Waver maintained utmost caution. He had cast a spell on the old couple, who lived alone all this time, making them think that Waver was their grandson who had returned from studying abroad. He had used the fake identity to live comfortably with great success. Also, he had no need to pay hotel rates; it was killing two birds with one stone. Things worked out perfectly and Waver began to admire his ability to adapt.

Seeking full enjoyment of the mild morning, Waver descended the stairs to the first floor kitchen and dining room, mentally filtering the cacophony of the crowing roosters. Like any other morning, the plebeian dining room table was decorated with scattered newspapers, while the news on television and the aroma of home cooking welcomed the freeloader openly.

"Good morning, Waver. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Grandpa. I was sound asleep until morning."

Waver answered with a smile while he spread jam thickly on his toast. The soggy bread cost only a hundred and eighty yen per catty[3], and was unpleasant to chew. The unsavory texture could only be mitigated with a thick spread of jam.

Glen and Martha Mackenzie had migrated to Japan from Canada more than twenty years ago, but their son could not get used to the Japanese lifestyle and decided to go back, starting a family in his home country instead. The grandson, raised in Japan until the age of ten, had also gone back. Not a single letter was sent, and they never visited again. Ten years had passed in this manner. The above information was obtained by Waver from the old couple through hypnosis. This kind of family was ideal for Waver. Planting hints in their memory, Waver transformed the old couple's impression of their grandson into his own image, successfully becoming their beloved grandson, Waver Mackenzie.

"But Martha, ever since dawn the chickens seemed to be very noisy. Do you have any idea how this happened?"

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3 Catty A measurement used in some countries in Asia. It is the equivalent of different amounts depending on which country it is used in.
In this context (Japan) it denotes half a kilogram, or five hundred grams.

"We have three chickens. Where did they come from . . .?"

Hastily making up an excuse, Waver hurriedly swallowed the bread in his mouth.

"Ah, that . . . I have a friend who sent us his pet chickens to be taken care of for a few days. He's going on a trip and won't be home, so they'll be here temporarily. I'm returning them this evening."

"Ah, so that's how it is."

The couple did not really mind, and easily believed it. It was a good thing that these two old people were starting to lose their hearing; the incessant crows of the three chickens nearly annoyed the surrounding neighbors to death that day. But the one under the most stress was Waver. As soon as he discovered the Command Seals on his hand, Waver excitedly began preparing the sacrificial offerings needed for the ceremony.

He never thought that finding a nearby chicken farm would be so difficult. Finally finding one, he wasted nearly an hour trying to catch three chickens. He finally got home just as the sky began to grow bright, his body covered with chicken droppings and his hands pecked bloody.

Back in Clock Tower, animals used as sacrificial offerings were always prepared beforehand. Here, a genius magus such as him had fallen to such piteous state after merely catching three chickens; Waver almost cried out in lamentation. But as he stared at the Command Seals on his right hand until morning came, his mood gradually began to brighten. He decided to hold the ceremony that night. Those annoying chickens could live until then.

Waver wanted to have the strongest Servant. The relic hidden in the closet of the second floor bedroom; that would be the catalyst for summoning a great Heroic Spirit. Waver already knew that much. The withered, half-decomposed piece of cloth was a piece of a cape that once hung on the shoulder of a king. The legendary King of Conquerors who destroyed the Achaemenid Empire of Persia and created the world's first extensive empire spanning from Greece to north-western India. Waver's Heroic Spirit would descend upon him during the summoning tonight, to guide him to the glorious Grail.

"... Grandpa, Grandma, I'm sending the chickens back to my friend's house tonight, so I might be a bit late. Don't worry about me."

"Okay. Be careful; Fuyuki isn't too safe lately. That fabled serial killer has appeared once more. This world really is too scary."

Eating cheap sliced bread at that long dining table, Waver was surrounded by life's greatest happiness. The noisy cries of the chickens only grated on his mood slightly.

– 282:14:28

The darkness was surrounded by ambition, accumulated over a thousand years.

Answering the summons of the Einsbern family head, Emiya Kiritsugu and Irisviel rushed to Einsbern's old castle, to a place sealed off by ice—a most grandiose but dark place—the Einsbern Castle's ceremony chamber. This place was not for praising the favor of gods, or for the spirit to seek peace. In this magi-inhabited castle, the so-called prayer room was the room where magecraft ceremonies were carried out through sacrificial offerings.

The colorful stained glass overhead displayed not a portrait of any saint, but rather the Einsberns' long history of pursuing the Grail. Of the Three Families of The Beginning, the Einsbern family had spent the most time on the Grail. Surrounding themselves deep in the icy mountains, stubbornly severing all ties with the outside world, they had begun seeking the miracles of the Grail almost a thousand years ago. But the search was filled with setbacks and humiliation, as well as suffering and opposition. In such a condition, their searching bore no results.

Finally despairing at this method of seeking the Grail alone, they reluctantly agreed to a pact of cooperation with the outsider families, Tousaka and Matou, two hundred years ago. They never won in the Heaven's Feel rituals that followed, due to the abilities of their Master, which always fell short. The final solution was to hire, from outside, magi who were apt at fighting. This decision was made nine years ago. Emiya Kiritsugu could be deemed the

trump card of the Einsbern family, which had always been proud of the purity of their bloodline; because of him, they even changed their family creed a second time.

Passing the halls, Kiritsugu's sight unwittingly found a relatively new painting on the colorful window. Drawn there was the Einsbern family's Holy Maiden of Winter, Lizleihi Justizia, and two magi waiting on her to the left and right. All three extended their hands to the Grail in the sky. From the painting's composition and the balance of its design, it was easy to see how contemptuously the Einsbern family looked down upon the Tousaka and Matou families two hundred years ago, as well as their humiliation at having to rely on them for help. The painting communicated it all. If he was lucky enough to win and survive the upcoming war—Kiritsugu gave a bitter mental laugh in a low, sarcastic voice—his own image would probably be portrayed against his will on a window in this manner.

The old magus, king of this wintery castle, awaited Kiritsugu and Irisviel in front of the sacrificial altar. JUBSTACHEIT VON EINSBERN, known as Acht after he became the eighth head of the Einsbern family. Through continuous prolonging of his life, he had lived for nearly two centuries now, leading the Einsbern family ever since they changed their focus from Grail-seeking to the Grail War.

Kiritsugu knew nothing of the Justizia era, but ever since the second Heaven's Feel began, old man Acht had suffered more than once the pain of defeat. For him, the anxiety of facing this third opportunity must be extraordinary. Nine years ago, he had welcomed this ill-reputed Magus Killer, Emiya Kiritsugu, into the

Einsbern family, for no reason other than Kiritsugu's amazing skills.

"The holy relic that we sought in Cornwall has finally arrived this morning."

Stroking his white beard, which invoked mental images of a frozen waterfall, old man Acht stared at Kiritsugu. An astute light came from deep within his eye sockets; this light within his eyes hid his senility. Despite having lived in this old castle for a long time, Kiritsugu could never tolerate the feeling of undue pressure from his eyes each time they met.

In the direction indicated by the old family head's pointing hand, a huge charcoal-colored box could be seen, tied ridiculously tightly atop the sacrificial altar.

"With this as a catalyst, it would be possible to summon the strongest Heroic Spirit of the Sword. Kiritsugu, consider this the Einsbern family's greatest aid to you."

"I am deeply grateful, dear head of the family." Feigning impassivity, Kiritsugu bowed deeply.

The Einsbern family had broken the rule, set since its founding, and brought external blood into the family, but the Grail seemed to have accepted it without opposition. The Command Seal appeared on Kiritsugu's right hand three years ago. Soon, he would shoulder the zealous thousand-year-old wish of the Einsbern family and participate in the upcoming fourth Heaven's Feel.

The old head of family turned his eyes to Irisviel, who lowered her gaze respectfully.

"Irisviel, what is the vessel's status?"

"There are no problems. Even in Fuyuki, it will function normally." Irisviel answered fluently.

The wish-granting machine, the omnipotent chalice, was only a spiritual entity and did not possess a physical form. To allow its Holy Grail form to descend, a Holy Grail vessel must be prepared. This war involving seven Servants of the Holy Grail could be called a spiritual evocation ritual as well.

Since the beginnings of Heaven's Feel, the task of preparing a man-made Grail vessel had always been carried out by the Einsbern family. In this fourth War, the responsibility fell to Irisviel. Therefore, she must leave for Fuyuki with Kiritsugu; she must be at the battlefield.

Old man Acht, eyes shining with insane strength, nodded seriously. "This time ... None must survive. Kill the six Servants! This time we must acquire the Third Magic, the Golden Grail."

"Yes sir!"

At the old family head's command spoken with such burning fervor, magus and homunculus, partners in fate, answered simultaneously. But in his heart, Kiritsugu could not care less about the rigid desire of this old head of family.

Achievement ... Einsbern's head of family had condensed all emotion into this one word which held infinite interpretations. One would think the only thing left in Einsbern's spirit was this stubborn desire for achievement.

The materialization of the spirit was a miracle. A thousand years had been spent seeking this lost miracle ... During this long and arduous journey, they had long since lost their methods and

purpose. If only to prove that their thousand-year journey was not for naught, if only for confirmation that it *did* exist, the Einsbern family fought with their lives to obtain the Grail. But to them, what the Grail would be used for once it had been summoned—that sense of purpose had long since disappeared.

It matters not. Per your expectations, through my hands I will grant you your sought-after Holy Grail. Refusing to lose to the old man's enthusiasm, Emiya Kiritsugu said this in his mind. *But that is not all. I will use that omnipotent chalice to grant my own deepest wish . . .*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kiritsugu and Irisviel went back to their own rooms. Opening the long box entrusted to them by the family head, they were mesmerized by its contents.

"Who would've thought? They were actually able to find this thing . . ." Kiritsugu, usually composed, seemed deeply impressed.

A scabbard, made of gold, and decorated with dazzling blue enamel; such luxurious equipment, in the class of crowns and scepters, should be called treasures, to attribute dignity and nobility which ordinary weapons did not possess. Engraved along the middle was an inscription written in long-lost Fairy Letters. Inscribed on both Excalibur and Avalon, it proved that this scabbard was no work of man.

". . . There is not the slightest flaw. Is this really the genuine relic made over a thousand and five hundred years ago?"

"This thing is a type of Conceptual Weapon. It suffers no physical deterioration, and it is a holy relic that will be used as a catalyst. This treasure belongs to the realm of magic."

Irisviel took the golden scabbard out of the lined box carefully, holding it in her hands.

"Legend says that keeping this scabbard on one's body will heal one's wounds, and stop aging . . . Of course, those are magical powers provided by its original owner."

"This means that as long as the summoned Heroic Spirit is functional, this thing can be used as a Master's Noble Phantasm."

The scabbard's ingenious one-of-a-kind design and exceptional beauty entranced Kiritsugu, but in just a few moments, his train of thought quickly turned toward ways of using it as a tool. Watching Kiritsugu, Irisviel could not help but show a small, bitter smile.

"That's so like you. A tool is a tool no matter what, right?"

"If you put it that way, Servants are the same too. No matter how famous the hero, as long as it is summoned as a Servant, to the Master he is a tool. It is impossible for one with unrealistic expectations of one's Servant to win this war."

Quite unlike his personality as a father or husband, Emiya Kiritsugu became extremely callous once he adopted the attitude of a soldier. Before she understood her husband more thoroughly, Irisviel had been really afraid of Kiritsugu when he was like that.

"Only someone like you would be worthy of this scabbard—that was Grandfather's judgment."

"Is that really how it is?"

Kiritsugu's expression was one of obvious dissatisfaction. If old man Acht knew how his hired son-in-law had reacted to the holy relic he spent so much effort searching for, he would certainly be speechless from rage.

"Are you dissatisfied with Grandfather's present?" Irisviel did not blame Kiritsugu at all for his impertinent remarks, but thought the question would be amusing.

"Why would I be? He has done more than enough for us. No other Master could possibly have gotten a trump card as good as this."

"Wherefore this dissatisfaction then?"

"The Heroic Spirit summoned from such a perfect holy relic would definitely be the one we want. But his personality and mine are far too different. The nature of the summoned Heroic Spirit is heavily affected by the Master's personality. Theoretically, all summoned Heroic Spirits should have personalities similar to their Masters'. However, the holy relic's origin overrides this determinism. The more explicit the origin of the holy relic, the more likely the summoned Heroic Spirit will be locked to a particular identity."

"... Which means you are uneasy about the contract with the King of Knights, right?"

"Of course. No one else in this world could be more incompatible with the ways of the knight than I." Half-jokingly, Kiritsugu's lips curled in a slight smile.

"A head-on battle is not my style; especially not death matches. If I attack, it will be from behind, while the enemy is asleep. With no regard for time or place, the purpose being only to eliminate

the enemy most efficiently, using the method with the greatest probability of success . . . Do you think that prestigious knight would aid me in such battles?"

Irisviel fell silent, staring at the shiny scabbard with great focus. Kiritsugu was the type of soldier who would attain victory by whatever means necessary. Undoubtedly, the personalities of Kiritsugu and the scabbard owner were definitely incompatible.

"... But isn't it such a waste? The owner of Excalibur is, no doubt, the strongest in the Saber Class."

That is right. The glory-radiating scabbard was the only fit partner to that supreme sword. This was definitely the relic of the King of Knights, whose tale had been passed down in legends since medieval times—King Arthur.

"Indeed. Saber is already the strongest of the seven classes conjured by the Holy Grail. And if the King of Knights were to be my familiar . . . I would have a virtually invincible Servant. But the key question here is how to use this most powerful force effectively. Honestly, in terms of ease of control, Caster and Assassin would fit my style more closely."

Just then, a light electronic sound—clashing with the extravagant nandi-flame-style decor of the room—interrupted their conversation.

"Ah, it is finally here."

On the heavy black sandalwood table was a haphazardly placed notebook computer. The combination was a marvel, like a stitching machine on an operating table. Magus lineages with long histories had not discovered the convenience of technology; the Einsbern family was no exception. The small electronic device,

strange beyond compare in Irisviel's eyes, was a personal item brought in by Kiritsugu. Rare was the magus who was not repulsed by the use of such machines; Kiritsugu was one such magus. When he requested the installation of a telephone line and power generator, a huge argument broke out between him and the old family head.

"... That sound—what is it?"

"A report from a fellow I sent to infiltrate the London Clock Tower. I asked him to investigate the status of the participating Masters in this Heaven's Feel."

Kiritsugu sat in front of the machine and began operating the keyboard in a skilled manner. The LCD monitor displayed a new mail notification. That was the new technology known in the cities as the Internet—Irisviel had already heard an explanation of it from Kiritsugu. But her forced patience toward her husband showed that she could not comprehend any of it.

"... Oh. Information on the identities of four Masters."

— The Tousaka participant is obviously the head of family, Tousaka Tokiomi. A thorny person with the fire attribute, specializing in jewel magecraft.

— The Matou family seems to have forced that failure, who could not succeed as the head of family, into being a Master. What nonsense ... But the old fogey of that family sure is exerting great effort to obtain the Grail.

— As for the magi coming from out of town, there is, first of all, the first-rate lecturer from Clock Tower, Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald. Ah, he knows about him. Possessing both wind and water attributes, an expert proficient in spiritual invocation,

summoning and alchemy. He is currently the most renowned magus in the Association. How troublesome.

— And there is a man sent by the Holy Church . . . Kotomine Kirei. Originally the representative of the Assembly of the Eighth Sacrament, he is the son of the supervisor, Kotomine Risei. Sent to Tousaka Tokiomi to learn magecraft three years ago, then broke away from his teacher after being granted the Command Seals. Hmph, a fellow filled with the smell of gunpowder.

Kiritsugu moved the screen with the cursor while browsing the detailed contents of the investigation. Watching her husband like this, Irisviel became extremely bored. Unnoticingly, she realized that at some point, Kiritsugu—who had been staring at the screen all this time—had suddenly put on a serious and tense expression.

"... What's wrong?"

"This son of Kotomine. Even his past has been wiped—"

Irisviel stood behind Kiritsugu and looked at the LCD monitor, following his pointed finger. To Irisviel, looking at text not printed on paper was very difficult, but seeing her husband's serious expression, she did not complain.

"... Kotomine Kirei. Born in 1967, accompanied his father Risei to the holy grounds since youth, graduated in '81 from the Theological College of Manresa St Ignacio . . . Skipped two grades, was the student council president. He seems to be quite an accomplished man."

Kiritsugu nodded unhappily.

"At this rate, he could definitely have reached the position of cardinal minister, but he willingly abandoned such an outstanding opportunity to join the Holy Church. In fact, he had lots of

choices. Why did he choose to dedicate himself to such a secret organization of the Church?"

"Perhaps he was influenced by his father? Kotomine Risei is part of the Holy Church too, right?"

"If that's the case, he should have shared his father's goal of retrieving lost holy relics all along. Indeed, Kirei did join the same department as his father in the end, but prior to that he had been transferred three times, and was once chosen as an Executor as well. He was only over ten years old then, too. Such a job cannot be done without a certain amount of willpower."

That was the Holy Church's bloodiest department, called "Shura's Den" because of its responsibility to punish heresies. Gaining the title of Executor meant that he was a first-rate murderer, and signified that he had passed brutal, pious training to become mankind's weapon.

"Perhaps he is a faith fanatic. The younger they are, the purer; there is such a thing as having a fanatic love of belief that surpasses certain limits."

Even after hearing Irisviel's opinion, Kiritsugu still shook his head.

"It's not that simple . . . If it was, then his situation in the past three years cannot be explained. If his faith was chaste, it would be impossible for him to transfer to the Magus Association; it seems to be an order from the Holy Church, or it's also possible that he was more faithful to the religious doctrine than the organization. But even this does not explain it, because there is no need to train in magecraft this seriously.

— Look. Tousaka Tokiomi's report about Kirei, given to the Association. The scope of training included alchemy, spiritual evocation, summoning, divination . . . He is even more adept at healing magecraft than Tousaka Tokiomi himself. What exactly is the reason for this enthusiasm?"

Irisviel continued reading the document to the end, where the summary of Kotomine Kirei's ability was.

". . . I say, this Kirei really is kind of strange, but is it worth it for you to scrutinize him to this degree? Although he seems very talented, he's not really much better than the others."

"Ah, that's what I find strange."

Kiritsugu patiently explained to an imperceptive Irisviel.

"No matter what he does, he would never achieve first-rate level. All considered, he's not some sort of genius; just a normal man. But his rapid achievement of results solely through total effort is indeed scary. Certainly, he would have to exert ten or twenty times more effort than others to achieve this. But he always stopped short at the final step, transferring somewhere else with no lingering sentimentality. Everything he had laboriously built up . . . tossed out like trash."

". . ."

"He clearly chose a lifestyle many times more exciting than others, but he never showed any affection to other people in his life either. This guy . . . is definitely a dangerous man."

Kiritsugu concluded thus. Irisviel understood the meaning behind his words.

When he used the word *troublesome*, Kiritsugu did not mean that the opponent was a threat, not even the particularly thorny

ones. The methods of dealing with such opponents, as well as the likelihood of success, were things that Kiritsugu was already eighty percent assured of. But if he rated someone as *dangerous* . . . Emiya Kiritsugu reserved that rating for opponents he had to fight wholeheartedly.

"This man does not believe in anything. He experienced so much because he was always seeking answers. Although in the end, he did not find anything . . . He is that kind of morally devoid man. If I had to make a guess at what lies in his heart, I would say it's probably filled with anger and despair."

". . . You are saying that this Executor is to you a more powerful foe than Tousaka Tokiomi and Archibald are?"

Pausing for a while, Kiritsugu nodded resolutely.

". . . A terrifying man. Indeed, Tousaka and Lord El-Melloi are strong adversaries. But I think Kotomine Kirei's way of existence is more fearful."

"Way of existence?"

"This man's heart is completely empty. He has nothing that can considered a wish. But why would a man like this bet his life to fight for the Grail?"

". . . Is this not the intent of the Holy Church? Supposedly, they mistakenly believed that Fuyuki's Grail is the real relic, and targeted it because of this, isn't it?"

"No. With only that level of motivation, the Grail would not have granted him Command Seals. He was chosen by the Grail as a Master; he must have some reason to obtain it. This inability to see his wish is precisely what makes him so terrifying."

Kiritsugu sighed deeply, looking at the monitor drearily, attempting to fabricate something more of the character of Kotomine Kirei from the dull text.

"What do you think would happen if this kind of empty, desireless man obtained the Grail? This man's whole life was built from despair. The power of the wish-granting machine, the Holy Grail, might be tainted by the color of his despair."

Kiritsugu was indulging his melancholy too much. In advice, Irisviel shook her head vigorously.

"What's stored within me, the vessel of the Grail, I will not give to anyone. When the Grail is filled, the one who has the privilege of owning it—it will only be you, Kiritsugu."

The elders of the Einsbern wished only for the completion of the Grail; that was their sole desire . . . But for this young couple, there were wishes, dreams, to be realized after this had been achieved.

Kiritsugu shut the lid of the notebook computer, and hugged Irisviel tightly.

"Whatever happens, we cannot afford to lose."

Right now, as his wife, Irisviel was putting their own ambitions before her family's desire. Kiritsugu was deeply moved.

". . . I found it—a way to use the strongest Servant's power most effectively."

– 282:14:41

Meanwhile, across the sea in the faraway land of the East, another person was receiving from the spy in England the same report that Kiritsugu had received.

Being a legitimate magus, Tousaka Tokiomi would not resort to using the new technology of the vulgar world as Kiritsugu did. He was, however, adept at using the Tousakas' exclusive secret technique of long-distance communication: a jewel-based magic passed down through the generations.

The Tousaka mansion towered in the Miyamachou district of Fuyuki. In Tokiomi's workshop, set up below ground, the installation of experimental equipment—looking very much like a black pendulum—was complete. The difference between the common physics experiment setup and this one was that this pendulum's massive bob contained a magic jewel from the Tousaka heirloom, and it was constructed such that the ink flowing down from the string would moisten the jewel. The stone that was paired with the jewel in this pendulum was in the possession of Tousaka's spy. If this stone was placed in front of a roll of paper, and one were to start writing, the matching pendulum's jewel would start to undulate, and the ink dripping down would write out perfect, error-free text on the paper roll underneath. That, in essence, was the structure's purpose.

At the moment, the jewel on the pendulum and the rock on the other side of the globe in London were undulating in sync. Through a strange, patternless and repetitive motion, the

reporter's writing began to surface smoothly and accurately. Tokiomi, noticing this, picked up the paper before the ink had dried completely, and began reading it.

"—No matter how many times I look at this setup, it always gives me an impression of unreliability." Kotomine Kirei, standing guard at the side the whole time, expressed his unscrupulous sentiments.

"Oh? So you think fax is more convenient? With this method, it does not matter even if the power was out, and there would not be any breakdowns. There is also no need to worry about the report being divulged. Without relying on any new technology, we magi have, for a long time, possessed apparatus not inferior to modern tools."

Even so, to Kirei's understanding, fax could be used by anyone, and was thus more convenient. Anyone could use it—this was something Tokiomi could not comprehend. It was perfectly reasonable that the techniques and knowledge of aristocrats were different from those of commoners—even in the present, Tokiomi still bore this outdated mode of thinking; he truly was a legitimate magus.

"The newest report from Clock Tower. The 'genius' Lord El-Melloi seems to have obtained a lost relic. It seems confirmed that he will be participating. Hmph, truly a thorny opponent. It is now clear that there are five Masters including myself . . ."

"It really worries me to hear that there are two positions still empty, even at this juncture."

"Why, it simply means there are no suitable bearers for the Command Seals. When time is running out, the Grail will

randomly fill the remaining slots, regardless of the quality of selected candidates. There should be two minor characters, selected for the sake of having the requisite number. There is no need to be anxious."

The reply really suited Tokiomi's optimism. Having been his student for three years, Kirei understood his master well. Although thorough in his preparation, once he was in action, he had a habit of missing small details. Taking care of these small details in his stead was probably his responsibility; Kirei had understood this for some time.

"Speaking of being careful—Kirei, nobody saw you as you entered this house, right? By appearances, we should already be public enemies."

In complete accordance with Tousaka Tokiomi's plan, reality had been twisted and announced. Kirei, chosen by the Grail three years ago, carefully hid the insignia on his right hand until this month, according to Tokiomi's order, before he announced the presence of the Command Seals on his hand. From that moment on, he severed his ties with Tokiomi as a contender for the Grail.

"There is no need to worry. Regardless of visibility, there are no familiars or spells surveying this house. I—"

"—I guarantee that."

The voice of a third person cut in, and at the same time a black shadow appeared beside Kirei. The Heroic Spirit who had been accompanying Kirei in spirit form all this time appeared in front of Tokiomi.

Compared to humans, the skinny, tall shadow was vastly different in prana level. He was . . . *inhuman;* a strange one,

draped in a long, black cloak, and wearing a white skull mask that shielded his features. Yes, he was the first Heroic Spirit to be summoned in the fourth Heaven's Feel, the Servant Assassin, who had made a contract with Kotomine Kirei—Hassan-I Sabbah.

"No matter what tricks they play, they cannot hide it from my eyes, the eyes of the Heroic Spirit of Subterfuge, Hassan. From my Master Kirei, I do not feel any aura of being followed by an enemy . . . You can rest easy." Assassin politely reported with a bow, as though understanding that Tokiomi's position was higher than that of his own master, Kotomine Kirei.

Kirei added, "As soon as a Grail-summoned Heroic Spirit appears, no matter which Class it belongs to, it would definitely be reported to Father accurately and without error."

Father Risei, dispatched to Fuyuki Church and appointed as its head priest, was the supervisor of this Heaven's Feel. At present, he was in possession of a magical device known as the Spirit Board. It could display the attributes of Heroic Spirits summoned by the Grail. The identity of the Masters could only be confirmed by reports from people, but the number and class of appearing Servants, no matter where they were summoned, would definitely be displayed on the Spirit Board, to grant the supervisor better control of the situation.

"According to my father, Assassin is the only Servant to have been summoned so far. The actions of other magi have yet to be executed."

"Yeah. But this is only a matter of timing. Eventually, familiars of other Masters will be coming and going about here, because

this place and the Matou mansion, as well as Einsbern's dwelling, are already confirmed locations of Masters."

Unlike the three imperial families, one advantage foreign magi had was that their place of hiding was unknown to others. For this reason, all families used spies for reconnaissance during the early stages of Heaven's Feel. Not that Kirei distrusted Tokiomi's information network; they simply had to watch for the possibility that the remaining two mystery Masters might be concealing themselves. Against opponents using this kind of strategy, Kirei's Servant Assassin could exercise his powers to the greatest limit.

"You may leave, Assassin. Continue keeping watch outside. Exercise utmost caution."

"Understood."

Receiving Kirei's command, Assassin once again assumed spirit form and left the room. For a Servant, a spiritual entity to begin with, shifting freely between spirit form and physical form was easily done. Assassin had the special ability of Presence Concealment that other classes did not possess. He was unrivaled in concealed movement and tracking. To Kirei, whose responsibility was not the pursuit of victory but the provision of backup to Tokiomi, summoning Assassin was the best choice.

That was the battle plan. First let Kirei's Assassin travel around, investigating thoroughly the battle stratagem of other Masters and the weaknesses of their Servants. Once a means of certain victory was found against each enemy, Tokiomi would use his Servant to defeat each one accordingly. He would need to summon a Servant possessing great offensive abilities. Kirei never heard him mention which Heroic Spirit he had his eye on.

"The holy relic I prepared will arrive tomorrow morning."

As though understanding Kirei's doubts from his expression, Tokiomi said this without being asked.

"I found what I was looking for. The Servant I summon will certainly be advantaged against all enemies. No Heroic Spirit would stand a chance against him."

Tokiomi was secretly pleased; his face brimmed with the unrivaled confidence he had been born with.

"The summoning ceremony will be held tonight. If no other Masters are spying on us, Kirei, you may be present too, along with your father."

"My father too?"

"Yes. If *he* is successfully summoned, then our victory is assured. I would like to share this happiness with everyone."

Such haughty confidence was an open display of Tousaka Tokiomi's hereditary characteristic. Kirei felt a twinge of awe and admiration at such an oversized ego.

Kirei's attention turned to the pendulum's jewel. The jewel's movement on the Rollin paper did not cease; it was still writing continuously.

"There seems to be more to come."

"Yeah. Ah, an investigation regarding another matter. This isn't the newest information; it's probably regarding my request for an investigation of Einsbern's Master."

Information on the Einsbern family, which had cut off all contact with the outside world, was difficult to obtain even in London's Clock Tower. But there was a lead on that Master.

Tokiomi rolled up the paper beside him and put it atop the writing table, then picked up the paper with the new text.

"... This was something that happened nine years ago. The Einsberns, who were so proud of their bloodline's purity, suddenly found a magus from the outside to be their son-in-law. This even instigated much debate within the Association at the time, but the only one other than myself who would be able to see the truth of this matter is the old head of the Matous.

"The magi of the Einsbern family, excelling only in alchemy, were unsuited to combat right from the start. This was a contributing factor to their losses in the previous Heaven's Feel rituals. They seem to have finally lost their patience. This magus they found seems to really fit the requirements."

Browsing through the paper quickly as he talked, Tokiomi then passed the paper to Kirei. On seeing *Investigation Report: Emiya Kiritsugu* in the title, Kirei's eyes narrowed slightly.

"This name ... I've heard it somewhere before. It is said to belong to a dangerous person."

"Oh? Does the Holy Church also know of this? The Magus Killer Emiya was really notorious at the time. In appearance, he did not belong to the Association, but he was in fact the killing tool of the higher-ups in the Association."

"So, in the words of the Church, he would be a sort of Executor, right?"

"Worse than that in nature. He was a freelancing assassin who had undergone special training to kill magi. Since the only ones who understood magi most thoroughly were other magi, he used methods most incompatible with the rules of magi to kill other

magi . . . He was the sort of man who would resort to despicable measures nonchalantly."

Despite the obvious hatred in Tokiomi's voice, Kirei began to gain interest in this man, Emiya Kiritsugu. He had heard rumors about him; it seems he had opposed the Holy Church in the past, and Kirei had been told to be very careful of him.

Kirei began reading the information passed on to him. Most of what was recorded was an investigation regarding Emiya Kiritsugu's battle strategy—the cases of missing persons and accidents believed to be magi he killed; but mainly it was an analysis of his methodology. While reading, Kirei began to understand why Tokiomi hated this man. Ambush and assassination were only the tip of the iceberg.

Planting a bomb in public, striking down an airplane with many passengers on board—these were the type of unbelievable cases that had been reported. It was surmised that tragic major acts of terrorism reported in the past were in fact the criminal acts of Emiya Kiritsugu, carried out for the sake of killing one magus. Although there was no convicting evidence, the information given painted a sufficiently convincing story.

Assassin; that word was very befitting. To magi, so opposed to each other that they were constantly at each other's throats, such scenarios were common. However, these were purely magecraft competitions, usually decided through a series of procedures that abided by certain combat regulations. By this classification, Heaven's Feel also belonged in the same category; although a war in name, it was not a chaotic death match, but was bound by a series of strict rules and regulations.

Not a single line of text could bear witness to Kiritsugu having abided by the regulations of magi in any battle.

"We magi exist outside the jurisdiction of human law to begin with, and that's all the more reason to obey strictly the rules of our own world."

Tokiomi's calm voice seethed with anger.

"But this man, Emiya, completely ignored all rules. He has no pride as a magus. Such a man is unforgivable."

"What you said was . . . pride?"

"Yes. Surely, even this man underwent strict training as a magus. If that's the case, then he certainly has the faith to overcome and surmount difficulties. It is impossible to forget his original intent and desire, even after attaining success."

"..."

Tokiomi was incorrect. Submitting oneself to brutal training without any intent whatsoever—such idiots did exist in this world. Kirei understood this better than anyone else.

"—So why did this Emiya Kiritsugu become a killing tool?"

"That—it's probably because of money. After entering the Einsbern family, he's washed himself clean. He has already obtained enough money to not be concerned by it for the rest of his life, so that is only reasonable. It should be written in the report; he did more than just assassinating. He seems to have done other stuff around the world for extra money, whenever the opportunity presented itself."

It was as Tokiomi said. Near the end of the report, recorded along with other magi-related incidents, there were lots of other experiences related to Emiya Kiritsugu. So that was how it is;

most of the conflicts going on around the world could be traced to Kiritsugu. No mere killing tool, he also did a lot of work as a mercenary.

"... This document—can I borrow it to read in detail?"

"Ah, sure. If you can analyze it in detail for me, that would be a great help. I'm still busy preparing for the summoning ritual tonight."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kirei left the workshop in the basement and returned to the ground floor. In the hallway, he ran into a young girl battling her oversized luggage.

"Good afternoon, Rin."

Not wanting to entertain her specially, he greeted her normally. The girl stopped in her tracks and stared at Kirei with wide eyes. He had been in contact with Rin in this house for three years, yet the suspicion in her eyes when she regarded Kirei had not diminished.

"... Good afternoon. Kirei."

With a hardened voice but a proper attitude, Rin returned Kirei's greeting. Although young, Rin was already acting like her mother, her actions refined and lady-like. She was clearly none other than Tousaka Tokiomi's daughter. Being different from other students her age was perfectly natural.

"Are you going out? That luggage is huge."

"Yes. Starting today, we will be going to Grandpa's house for a bit. I'm even taking the cable car from that side to go to school."

Because Heaven's Feel was imminent, Tokiomi decided to let his family live temporarily in the neighboring district, at his mother-in-law's house. The mother and daughter could not be exposed to the battlefield; that would be too dangerous, of course. These were reasonable arrangements.

But his daughter Rin seemed very dissatisfied about this. She had fine features, but her cute little mouth was puffed up, proclaiming her unhappiness. Although she would be a fine lady in future, at the moment she was still just a child; one could not expect her to fully behave in grown-up fashion.

"Kirei, you're staying with Father to help him fight, right?"

"Yes. As his apprentice, that is what I should be doing."

Rin was not a clueless child. As the Tousaka magi's successor, she was receiving Tokiomi's expert teaching, and was already somewhat knowledgeable regarding the imminent Fuyuki Heaven's Feel.

As for this displacement to her grandfather's house, Rin could understand the legitimate explanation of the reasons. Her dissatisfaction lay in the thought that if she was gone, Kirei would be the only one left in the Tousaka house, and he could do whatever he wanted. Rin had extraordinary respect for her father Tokiomi. As the successor, her dislike for Kirei stemmed from his status as Tokiomi's first student, and his learning of magecraft from him before she did.

"Kirei, can I trust you? Will you protect Father to the end? Will you promise me that?"

"That is impossible. If this war was benign enough for me to promise you that, then there would be no reason for you and your mother to get out of harm's way, right?"

Kirei, unwilling to offer empty words of comfort, spoke the truth plainly. But Rin's eyes became fiercer, glaring at her impudent and shameless apprentice elder.

"... As I thought, I don't like you one bit."

Kirei only had a favorable impression of her when she was speaking upset words befitting her age.

"Rin, don't speak such impolite words in front of others. You will put the moral character of your father to question."

"This has nothing to do with Father!"

Even Father had been used as a shield; Rin's face blushed profusely with anger. It was exactly what Kirei hoped to see.

"Listen up Kirei! If Father is hurt because of your errors, I will definitely not forgive you! I—"

At that moment, with impeccable timing, Aoi's shadow appeared. Already done with her preparations but noticing Rin's absence, she had come to check on her.

"Rin! What are you doing? And in such a loud voice!"

"—Ah, that is, I—"

"She came to encourage me before her departure, lady."

Kirei helped Rin with pretentious calm, which only served to make Rin angrier. But she could not say anything in front of her mother, so she turned to leave.

"I'll help you with the luggage, Rin. It is too heavy for you."

"No! I can do it myself!"

Rin pulled at the box even more vigorously, miring herself into a fiercer battle with the case; she finally got it out the door. Kirei, though aware that it was unbecoming of a mature adult, still wanted to laugh at Rin when given the chance.

Aoi gave Kirei a respectful bow.

"Kotomine-san, I leave my husband in your hands. Please help him realize his wish."

"I will do my best. Please do not worry."

From Kirei's perspective, Tousaka Aoi was the perfect wife. Solemn and discreet; meticulous; understanding toward her husband; never interfering; put loyalty above love; respected duty —in short, she was the perfect model of a traditional wife and mother. In an era when feminist emancipation was soaking into society, she was like a character carved from stone. Tokiomi had picked a most compatible person as his spouse.

Kirei stood at the door to see the mother and daughter off. They left, not in a taxi but in a private car, with Aoi at the wheel. The chauffeur and all the servants had been laid off last week. They could not allow harm to befall the innocent; it was also to guard against espionage. Tokiomi was not cautious enough to keep guard against his servants; the suggestion was Kirei's, and Tokiomi had been half-forced to carry it out.

Before the car left, Rin, shielded from her mother's eyes, stuck her tongue out at Kirei, making a face. Kirei laughed bitterly, then returned to the now-empty mansion.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Tokiomi had not left the basement workshop yet. Kirei, the sole occupant of the otherwise empty living room, began to read the report regarding Emiya Kiritsugu thoroughly. He did not understand why he felt such intense interest in this strange magus unknown to him. Perhaps it was pleasure derived from the loathing of this man by his teacher, Tokiomi.

The teacher—student relationship, maintained in this house for three years, always had a sense of satire about it. As a teacher, Tokiomi could find nothing to nitpick on when it came to Kirei's concentration in learning and speedy comprehension; he was a holy servant who detested magecraft, yet had immense interest in all fields of it. Kirei's greedy desire for knowledge delighted Tokiomi. At present, his trust in Kirei was completely unshakable. He even made his only daughter, Rin, respect him as an elder apprentice.

Kirei's heart, in contrast to Tokiomi's increasingly profound friendship, was becoming increasingly desolate. He did not study magecraft because he liked it. Having led a long, pious life in the Church that brought him nothing, Kirei placed his hopes on a new school of study, with values opposing the Church's, but it was a disaster. Kirei found no enjoyment and gained no satiation in magecraft. Quite the opposite; it widened the empty hole in his heart.

Tokiomi did not seem to have noticed Kirei's disappointment at all. Kirei's assessment of his character, "the same kind of person as my father," was completely correct. Tokiomi's appraisal of and trust for Kirei was exactly the same as Risei's. There had always been an uncrossable line between him and people like Tokiomi and

his father. He understood this; it was probably the reason he had such interest in a character whom Tokiomi detested.

He thought that perhaps this man Emiya Kiritsugu existed on "the other side of the line." Tokiomi's caution against Emiya Kiritsugu was purely on the basis of his title of Magus Killer. The report created at his request focused on Kiritsugu's personal history of battles against magi; records not on this topic were rather simplistic.

But looking at Kiritsugu's experiences in chronological order, Kirei began to develop a conjecture. His actions involved a high degree of risk. During his freelance-assassination days, before the Einsberns took him in as their son-in-law, Kiritsugu skilfully completed countless missions. But the intervals between his missions were clearly too short. Considering the time required for preparing and accepting missions, the only possible conclusion was that he had simultaneously executed several plans. These plans were all carried out in parallel; he appeared in conflicts in various regions, always when the conflict was most heated, tottering on the verge of destruction. Suicidal and seemingly driven by some sort of illness . . . His actions were clearly aimed at self-destruction.

What he stood to gain from his actions did not justify the risk involved. He could not conceivably be the kind of freelancing assassin who was motivated solely by money. If so . . . What was it he sought?

"..."

Kirei put the report aside, propped his lower jaw on his hand, and sank into deep thought. Emiya Kiritsugu had led a turbulent life, one inconceivable to other people. Kirei could relate to such a life. A magus without pride, a man who had lost his belief; that was Tokiomi's assessment of him. Kiritsugu's intense experiences seemed to be part of his search for destruction . . . or perhaps a journey to seek long-lost answers? Nine years ago, the curtain suddenly fell on Kiritsugu's battles. In his ongoing search, he met the Einsbern magi who were seeking victory in Heaven's Feel in the northern lands. He had found his answer then.

Right now, Kirei was anxiously anticipating his meeting with Emiya Kiritsugu. He had finally discovered the significance of his participation in the Fuyuki battle. He still had no interest in the Grail, but if Kiritsugu would break a nine-year silence for it, it might be significant enough to justify his participation in a fight in which victory could dispel all difficulties. He wanted to ask Kiritsugu, "What is it you seek from this battle? What do you gain from it in the end?" He would confront Emiya Kiritsugu by any means, even on a battlefield, in a life-or-death wager.

– 271:33:52

Matou Kariya's mental strength had withstood the bitter pain, but his physical body had reached its limit. Within three months, all his hair had turned white. His skin was covered with emerging lesions, interspersed with regions devoid of the rosy tone of living flesh; these turned instead into a sepulchral shade of earthen gray. The poison named "prana," circulating in his veins, could be seen sprawling beneath his semi-transparent flesh, as though his torso was harboring a crawling mess of inky black cracks.

In this manner, his body collapsed more rapidly than he could ever imagine. The impact was particularly severe on the left side of his body and its accompanying nerves, such that at one point his left wrist and ankle were completely paralyzed. Temporary rehabilitation got them working again, but the left hand still reacted slower than the right, and a quicker stride would result in a dragging left foot. Palpitations arising from his irregular pulse were a regular occurrence. He could not take solid food; intravenous glucose injections were used as a substitute instead.

To modern medicine, it was amazing that a creature in his state could continue living and functioning. Although Kariya could still stand and walk, it was, somewhat ironically, a gift granted to him by the prana that he as a magus had bought in exchange for his life. The Crest worms invading Kariya's flesh had already grown into a form that could imitate the function of Magic Circuits. To preserve the life of their decaying possessor, they now acted out

their role desperately. His progress had exceeded Matou Zouken's expectations. The Command Seals showed up distinctly on his right hand; the Holy Grail had accepted him as the Matous' representative.

Based on Zouken's estimations, Kariya had about a month left to live. For Kariya, this was enough. Heaven's Feel had entered its countdown. If all seven Servants were summoned, the war may even begin tomorrow. From past experience, the war should last for about two weeks, ending sometime before Kariya's death. But activating his Magic Circuits would incite the Crest worms. The burden placed on his body would far exceed what the other magi experienced. In the worst case scenario. the Crest worms would devour their host before the war ended. Kariya did not only have to fight against the other six Masters; one could say his greatest enemies were the creatures hosted within him.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

That night, as Kariya approached the basement to face the final test, he met Sakura in the corridor by chance.

"..."

The frightened expression that emerged on Sakura's face when she first saw him pricked Kariya's chest slightly. Though there was nothing he could do, Kariya was still pained to know he was now an object of Sakura's fear.

"Oh, Sakura—were you scared?"

"... Um. Your face, what happened to it?"

"Ah. It's just a little problem."

His left eye had lost its sight yesterday. The muscles surrounding the nebulous dying eyeball also fell into paralysis. The eyelid and brow could not be moved either. The left side of his face showed signs of lifelessness, turning rigid like a mask. His reflection frightened even him, let alone Sakura.

"Just a bit more, then I can be defeated by the worms within me. Uncle is not as enduring as Sakura."

A bitter smile became a gruesome grimace. Sakura curled away in fear.

"Uncle Kariya, you are like a different person now."

"Haha, maybe you're right." With a dry, pretentious laugh, the matter was glossed over.

I can say the same of you, Sakura—Kariya commented wearily in his heart. Sakura, now taking the name of Matou, had become a different girl; she was no longer the Sakura whom Kariya knew. Her gaze was hollow and dim like a doll. Throughout the year, he had never glimpsed the various emotions behind those eyes. The innocent face of the girl who followed her elder sister Rin and played carelessly like a puppy had long since disappeared. Considering the cruel training she undertook this year to succeed the Matou magecraft, this was understandable.

Indeed, Sakura's body had fitting potential for a magus, far greater than Kariya and his elder brother, Byakuya. But it was more appropriate for the Tousaka brand of magecraft, which was fundamentally different from the Matou brand. Acclimatization was needed in order to allow Sakura's body to adapt to the Matou magecraft. These so-called acclimatization treatments were

tortures that occurred day and night in the underground worm storage of the Matou residence, under the guise of "education."

Children are immature. They possess neither firm resolve nor the strength to turn their misery to anger. They do not have a will strong enough to confront a cruel fate with. They have not lived long enough to truly comprehend life's many facets. Ideals such as honor and hope have yet to be fully nurtured in them. In moments of despair, they are more prone to sealing away their minds and locking up their hearts. They have not tasted the *joy* of life; they can bear to throw the chance away. They have not understood the meaning of *future;* they can abandon themselves to despair.

In the short duration of a year, Kariya had witnessed a girl gradually shutting her heart out from the torments imposed upon her. He had suffered the piercing pain of the parasite worms eroding away his body, and the overwhelming guilt that sought to devour his soul. Undoubtedly, he was one of the causes of Sakura's anguish. Kariya cursed Matou Zouken, Tousaka Tokiomi, and himself.

His only consolation was that Sakura, now introverted like a doll, could only be carefree when she was with Kariya, occasionally even uttering surprisingly innocent words when they met. Whether because of their common pain, or of their friendship forged while she was still Tousaka Sakura, the girl continued to regard him differently from her "tutors," Zouken and Byakuya.

"I don't need to go to the worm storage room today. Grandfather said something more important would happen there."

"Ah, I know. That's why Uncle is taking your place to go to the worm storage."

Sakura tilted her head like a little spy.

"Uncle Kariya, are you leaving for someplace far away?"

With the sharp intuition of a child, Sakura seemed to have realized Kariya's fate. Still, he did not want to worry the young Sakura too much.

"Uncle's going to be busy with important business for a while, so I won't have much time to talk to Sakura like this."

"Is that so . . ."

Sakura looked away from Kariya, immediately reverting to a blank gaze; a gaze focused on some distant object in her vision. Pained to see Sakura like this, Kariya changed the topic.

"Say, Sakura-chan. Shall we play together again when Uncle's work is finished? With your mother and big sister."

"Mother, Big Sister . . ." Sakura said dejectedly with a pause. ". . . I don't have people I can call by those names anymore. Grandfather told me I should pretend they did not exist."

"I see . . ." An indecisive reply. Kariya knelt and held her shoulders in a soft embrace with his still-functional right hand. Her head buried in his chest, Sakura could not see Kariya's crying visage.

"Then, let's bring Aoi and Rin from the Tousaka family and go somewhere far, far away; just the four of us, like we used to. What do you say to that?"

"—Can we see those people again?" A weak voice sounded within the space his arms enclosed. Kariya tightened the hand that held Sakura, and nodded.

"Of course we can see them again. I promise you."

He could promise nothing else. If he could, he would use other words, he would make a different promise. If he could, Kariya longed to tell Sakura right now that she would only have to endure a few more days before he delivered her from Matou Zouken's deathly grasp. But that would kill her.

In despair and resignation, Sakura protected herself by paralyzing her mind. To deal with the unbearable pain, the hapless girl destroyed the sense of self which let her feel. *"Keep hoping. Look after yourself."*—Who could speak such cruel words to a child like this? These lines, conferring temporary solace, appeased only the one speaking them. To give hope, one has to take away the armor of despair—Sakura's young and tender mind would collapse. Therefore . . .

Although they both lived in the Matou residence, Kariya was not Sakura's savior. He could only stand with her, as an adult bullied by Zouken; one just as powerless as she.

"—Goodbye then. Uncle's gotta go now."

Kariya released Sakura, hoping his tears had dried. Sakura looked up solemnly at the decaying left side of Kariya's face.

". . . Mm. Bye, Uncle Kariya."

Such appropriate words of farewell for the occasion; though only a child, she picked them out with astounding accuracy. Kariya prayed in his heart as he watched Sakura's spiritless, retreating figure—Please, let it not be too late. He no longer cared about things concerning himself. His life was already given to Aoi and Sakura. He was too late, but he had no regrets, save for the

possibility that he could be dead before he even managed to get his hands on the Grail.

The only thing worrying him was Sakura. If Kariya successfully obtained the Holy Grail and returned Sakura to her mother, could the girl, sealed tightly in despair, one day break that shell and once again join the outside world? The heartbreak Sakura had endured this year would undoubtedly stay with her for life, but he hoped they will heal with time. He hoped her heart had not been dealt a deadly blow by the torments she faced. He could only pray. The one who could heal the wounds of her heart was not he. He had far too little time left; he could not take up that job. That was a job for those whose future lives were guaranteed.

Kariya turned around, and slowly but resolutely took the staircase leading to the underground worm storage room.

– 270:08:57

In a clearing surrounded by bushes, Waver Velvet began his preparation for the summoning ritual. The entire day, Waver's nerves had been so tautly stretched by the incessant crowing of the chickens that a ritual of purification for the mind was needed before the conduction.

The shape of the magic circle must be drawn on the ground while the dripping chicken blood was still warm. He had practiced the procedure many times, drawing the four encircling patterns of departure quickly inside the summoning circle. No mistakes must be made.

"Shut. Shut. Shut. Shut. Shut. Five perfect repetitions. Now, let the filled sigils be annihilated in my stead!"

Waver carefully spread the chicken blood on the ground as he chanted the incantation.

In the basement workshop of the Tousaka residence, identical preparations were being made for the same ritual.

"Ye first, O silver, O iron. O stone of the foundation, O Archduke of the Contract. Hear me in the name of our great teacher, the Archmagus Schweinorg. Let the descending winds be as a wall. Let the gates in all directions be shut, rising above the crown, and let the tri-forked roads to the Kingdom revolve."

Tousaka Tokiomi chanted the incantation loudly as he inscribed the magic circle, using not sacrificial blood but the molten essence of magical gems. To prepare for this day, Tousaka

had used up all the prana-filled gems stockpiled in his hoard. Beside him were the Kotomines, Risei and Kirei.

Kirei gazed intently at the holy relic on the altar. At first glance it looked like a broken fragment of a mummy, but it was apparently fossilized skin shed by the first snake in the world, in ancient times eons ago. Feeling a wave of fear, he shivered at the thought of the Heroic Spirit it would summon.

Tokiomi's confidence was finally understood. No Servant could possibly defeat the Heroic Spirit Tokiomi had chosen.

At the same time, in the distant Einsbern castle, Emiya Kiritsugu was examining the completed summoning circle inscribed on the floor of the ceremony room.

"Would such a simple ritual suffice?"

Irisviel, watching the procedure from the side, was surprised by spartan nature of the preparations.

"You may be disappointed, but Servant-summoning never required an extravagant spiritual evocation ceremony." Kiritsugu explained as he carefully checked for twists and smudges on the patterns drawn in mercury.

"It is not the power of the magus that summons the Servant, but the power of the Holy Grail. As a Master, I am only a cord that connects the Heroic Spirit with the world we reside in, and I merely provide him with the prana necessary for materialization in this world."

Satisfied with the completed state of the summoning circle, Kiritsugu nodded and stood up. The holy relic—the sheath of the legendary holy sword—was placed on the altar.

"Victory should be within our grasp."

"Have you memorized the summoning incantations properly?" Matou Zouken repeatedly reminded Kariya for safety's sake. The latter nodded in the darkness.

Pregnant with the foul odor of rot and dampness, a green darkness like the sea depths—this was the worm storage hidden deep beneath the grounds of the Matou residence, which stood on the hill of the small mountainous town.

"That's good. But midway through the incantation, add two more incantation lines."

"What do you mean?"

Zouken smiled ominously at Kariya's confused expression.

"Isn't it obvious? Kariya, you should know that your abilities fall short of the other Masters by quite a margin. It would affect the basic abilities of the Servant. They can only be compensated by selecting the Servant's class. We must raise the parameter from the root up." They were predetermining the Servant's class by altering the summoning incantations.

Assignment of Servant classes was decided by the summoned Heroic Spirit's attributes, but there were exceptions; two classes could be designated by the summoner beforehand.

Assassin was one of them. The Heroic Spirit belonging to this class could be assumed to be a group of killers inheriting the name Hassan-I Sabbāh. The other class could be taken by any Heroic Spirit, and could be manifested as long as the summoner incorporated the required foreign ingredients. Therefore—

"This time, give the summoned Servant the attribute Mad Enhancement!" Zouken declared loudly with an overjoyed face, openly welcoming the disastrous implications of his decision.

"Kariya, as Berserker's Master, fight with all you've got."

On that day, incantations from different lands, targeted at different entities, were chanted almost simultaneously—a harmony so coincidental it could hardly be regarded as an accident of chance. For all the magi have the same hope—

A hope for a miracle. The summons, uttered to heroes on the other side of the universe by humans who would brutally slaughter each other to achieve that miracle, rang out from the earth at the same time.

"Set—"

This moment would present the greatest test to him as a magus. He could lose everything, even his life. Waver felt this acutely, but he was not the least bit afraid.

A passionate desire for strength. A determination to relentlessly pursue his goal. By those qualities, Waver Velvet was undoubtedly an outstanding magus.

"—Set. Let your body rest under my dominion, let mine fate rest in your blade. If ye submit'st to the Holy Grail's call, and if ye wouldst obey this mind, this reason, then ye shalt respond."

The sensation of prana surrounded his body. No magus could escape the malevolent chill and agony from the slithering, circulating Magic Circuits within his corporal being. Waver gritted his teeth as he kept chanting the incantation.

"—I make my oath here. I am the one who is become the virtue of all Heaven. I am the one who is covered with the evil of all Hades."

Kiritsugu's sight darkened. The Emiya family crest, passed down through the generations and carved on his back, began to chant the incantation separately, as an individual entity, supporting Kiritsugu's magecraft. His heart, in a dimension that escaped his mind's control, began to beat rapidly like a hurrying clock hand. Tormented by the prana gathered from the surrounding air, his flesh had already forgotten its function in a human body; instead, it now became a component of the mysterious ceremony, purely a circuit connecting the ethereal to the material. The severe pain created by this discord was enough to make one scream out loud, but Kiritsugu paid it no heed, concentrating instead on pronouncing his incantation. Even the presence of Irisviel, who stood beside him with her breath held, was no longer present in his consciousness.

Adding the forbidden, alien ingredient in the summoning incantations, Kariya included the two incantation lines that would rob the summoned Heroic Spirit of its sanity and demote it to a Berserker.

"—Yet, you serve with eyes clouded in chaos. You, bound in the cage of madness: I am he who commands these chains—"

Kariya was different from the other magi; his Magic Circuits were other organisms living within him as parasites. The anguish that came from inciting them and activating his Circuits was incomparable to what the other magi faced. As he chanted the

incantations, his limbs twitched in spasms, and blood seeped out from his burst capillaries. Sanguine tears flowed from the remaining intact eye on the right and dripped down his cheek. Kariya did not grow lax in his concentration. By thinking about his duty, he found the courage not to shrink away.

"Ye seven heavens, clad in trinity of words, come past the restraining rings, be the hands that protect the balance—!"

As his prayers ended, Tokiomi felt the acceleration of the prana racing in his body reach its utmost limit. Thunder and lightning roared, accompanied by rolling clouds borne on a mighty wind. In the ferocity of a gale so violent that onlookers like Kirei could not open their eyes, the patterns of the summoning circle glimmered brilliantly. Finally, the Magic Circuits connected with a plane that lay beyond men . . . From the dazzling light shining forth, the golden silhouette of an upright figure emerged. Awed by august solemnity, Risei muttered dreamily in spite of himself.

"... We have won, Kirei. Our battle is won ..."

Mortal wishes were passed to them like this; to these legendary illusions arriving here from the other side, wrapped in tornadoes and lightning. Originally human, but later separated from the mortal plane. Elevated to the level of elementals through powers not of men. The place where supernatural primates gathered ... The Throne of Heroes which had its power of the Gods suppressed. Heroic Spirits, weaved from the dreams of countless ordinary men, descended onto the earth all at the same time.

Then—

In a forest at night, on a stone stool enveloped by the darkness, at each of these locations a majestic voice now challenged:

"I ask thee, art thou the Master who called me?"

Act 2

– 268:22:30

Waver had expected the day to end at the peak of triumph, with a successful summoning. After the events of the past night, spent in fierce battle with the cackling chickens, he had spent this night studying in his bed, wearied but pleasantly satisfied by his accomplishment. Yet—

"... How did this happen?"

A dry gust blew over the public park in the Shinto area. Waver sat on the bench, curled up in the lonely coldness. There was something he still could not comprehend—*"just how on Earth did my plan go wrong?"*

The summoning was successful. The invited Servant's stature, as well as the successful summoning, was still imprinted in Waver's mind. He was a Rider-class Servant; though not one of the three major knight classes, his basic abilities were above average. Without a doubt, he was a powerful Servant. When he saw the huge silhouette rising slowly from the summoning circle

behind the white smoke, Waver was so excited he nearly messed his pants.

. . . However, on careful consideration, the situation had actually taken a turn for the worse at that point. To Waver's wit, a familiar was the puppet of its summoner, an existence that barely survived in the present world by relying on the prana supplied by the magus. A wooden doll, to be used as the practitioner pleases. Waver guessed that a Servant would be the same, at least in principle. But that thing which came out of the summoning circle —

Right from the start, those sharp eyes, glowing like a blaze, had taken Waver's soul. The instant they made eye contact, he instinctively sensed the Servant's might, and was overwhelmed like a small animal. The giant's overbearing presence crowded his view. His body odor, the scent of the muscular stature—Waver understood. Whether ghost or familiar, he sure was a *huge* guy.

Waver knew that the Heroic Spirits invited by the Grail were not only free spirits, they also received a material body to exist in the present world. But the massive cluster of muscles which formed the actual entity—not a virtual image or a shadow, but the source of this feeling of impending threat—was beyond Waver's imagination. Whatever the reason, Waver hated this great man.

There was more to it than Waver's slightly-below-average height. Certainly, his body tended on the frail side because his childhood was spent doing nothing but studying and he had little time to forge his body, but he did not think it a weakness. Rather,

Waver took pride in the polishing of his intellect. But such an obvious truth would not get through the big man's muscles. Whatever happened, there simply would be no time to think before this rock-brained giant smashes his fist down; there would be no time for discussion, however brief. There would be no future in using magecraft . . . once he was approached by that fist.

". . . So, I'm asking you. You must be my Master, right?"

"Hah?"

That was the big man's second question. His booming voice could shake the Earth. Waver's senses had been overloaded from the first question asked, in a voice impossible not to hear.

"Ah—Yes! I-I-I-I'm, I mean, I am! I am your Master, I'm called Wa-Waver Velvet! I mean, that's my name! I'm your Master!!"

Though clearly pointless, Waver stuck to his bluff, trying his best to stand up to the bundle of muscles in front of him. Still, he could not shake off the dominating impact of the unaware giant's physique.

"Hm, then the contract is complete. So, boy, can you take me to your archives immediately?"

"Hah?" Waver's mind was blown for the second time.

"Some books, I'm saying! Books." The giant Servant repeated himself gloomily, leaning toward Waver and stretching out a strong arm that looked like the root of a pine tree.

I'm going to be killed—Waver thought, and immediately felt a floating sensation. The giant had seized his neck and carelessly lifted him. Waver did not notice until then that he had fallen flat

on the ground. That must be why, mid-way through their conversation, his interlocutor looked even more like a giant.

"If you are one of them magi, you should be able to provide some archives right? Now, show me around. We need to prepare for war."

"Wa-war . . . ?"

The giant's mention of the word reminded Waver, who had totally forgotten about the Holy Grail War.

As a blatant freeloader in a privately owned house, Waver had no archive of any sort, so he reluctantly led Rider to the public library instead. Fuyuki's central library was in the public park, the part of the Shinto area still under construction. Walking through the city in the middle of the night felt awkward. With the recent spate of strange murders, the police frequently announced a state of emergency. But to Waver, the big pack of muscles in front of him posed a more serious problem than being questioned by the patrolling police.

Fortunately, as soon as they came out of the grove, the giant turned invisible. That must be an ability the Servants had—going into spirit form. Waver felt relieved. He would not look suspicious walking before an invisible big man wearing armored cloth, but he still felt the pressure of being followed by that overbearing presence. Luckily, they did not meet anyone as they crossed Fuyuki's big bridge into the Shinto area. When they reached the public park, Waver pointed at the modern building in the back.

"There should be as many books as you want over there."

The oppression weighing on Waver softly went away. Rider was entering the building in spirit form.

Now, it had been thirty minutes since he had been left behind. Released from the threat he could not comprehend, he was finally able to sort his thoughts calmly.

"... How, did this happen?"

Waver buried his head in his hands, recalling his shameful behavior earlier. However powerful it may be, the Servant was still his contracted familiar. As the Master, Waver was the one who should have seized leadership. The Servant he had summoned was certainly strong. That was a given, considering the history of the relic he had stolen from Kayneth.

The Heroic Spirit Iskandar, also known as Alexander or Alexandros.

The reason he was known by several names—depending on the pronunciation of the land—was that he was the heroic King of Conquerors. Succeeding the throne of Macedonia at the young age of twenty, he had led ancient Greece in an invasion of Persia, before pushing through Egypt, up to western India during the great eastern campaigns, and achieving success as a great hero in a mere ten years. He was the great king of the era, who built what was known as the Hellenistic civilization. Though such a great man among other great men, once he was summoned as a Servant, even he could not oppose his Master. After all, he depended on Waver in this world. If Waver stopped supplying him with prana for him to remain in this era, he would have no choice but to disappear.

All Servants answer the summoning, fighting in the Holy Grail War alongside their Master, with good reason. Like their Masters, they also seek the Grail. If they hoped to attain that wish-granting machine, they would also have to fight to be the only one remaining, to obtain the graces of the Grail alongside their Master. In other words, cooperation between Master and Servant was natural.

Furthermore, the Masters also hold the trump card—the Command Seals. The three seals could be used, one by one, for three orders of absolute authority. That defined the relationship between Servant and Master. The Servant could not oppose an order given with the authority of the Command Seals, even if it was as unreasonable as an order to self-destruct. That was the central point of the contract system made up by one of the Three Families of the Beginning, the Makiris. On the other hand, a Master who had used up all three of his Command Seals would be exposed to the danger of rebellion by his Servant, but it was a risk that could be avoided if the Master acted with astute caution.

Yes. So long as the Command Seals were carved on his hand . . . Suppressing the irritation in his stomach, Waver stared trance-like at his right hand, chuckling. Not even that mass of muscles would have reason to oppose Waver Velvet. *As soon as that Servant comes back, I will remind him of that inviolable rule to his face* . . . While Waver was thinking, the hearty roar of something breaking was heard.

"Hih?!"

Jumping in surprise, he turned around as the doors of the library hall were twisted and torn off. The one who calmly walked

through the gaping entrance, materialized under the moonlight, was none other than Waver's Servant, Rider. Earlier, he could not see properly in the dark forest, but now, for the first time, he could clearly see how Rider looked in the light.

He easily exceeded two meters in height. His unprotected arms and thighs extended from his bronze armor. Judging by the size of the muscles all over his body, he could kill a bear with his bare hands. On his sternly chiseled features were eyes of dazzling glow, burning red hair, and a beard. The thick mantle, dyed in a similar shade of red, with fringes like his cuffs, was luxuriously decorated, like a curtain wrapping the stage of a theater. The magnificent posture of the big man in front of the modern library formed a rather amusing combination, but Waver took no interest in that; the shrilly alarms got him ready to flee.

"Idiot! Stupid, stupid, stupid! What were you thinking, kicking the shutters down like that! Why aren't you in spirit form like when you entered?!"

Rider strangely smiled in good humor, holding out two books in front of the defiant Waver.

"I couldn't have picked them up in spirit form, could I?"

A thick hardcover and a thin one—Rider had taken them from the library. But his Master could not afford to disturb public order for such triviality.

"Hurry up! Run! We have to run!"

"How unsightly to be so flustered. You look like a thief or something."

"What thief? What's wrong with you!"

Rider was astonished by the threat in Waver's yell.

"You misunderstand greatly. Those who run away under cover of the night are burglars. Walking away victoriously is what the King of Conquerors does after looting."

You simply cannot discuss anything with him, Waver thought, scratching at his head madly. At any rate, Rider apparently wanted to parade through the night, the two books in hand, looking like a suspicious cosplayer; he had no intention of going back to spirit form. Already at the end of his wits, Waver rushed to Rider and took the two books from his hand.

"You're done, now, right?! Now disappear! Disappear right now! Disappear immediately!"

"Ooh, then I'll leave this to you. You don't need to repeat yourself."

Satisfied, Rider nodded and turned invisible again. But Waver was still not relieved. The library alarm would certainly alert a security firm. One would not know how long one had before security guards rushed in. . . . Oh, what the heck, who cares.

"Aah, damn—How—did this happen, man?!"

Waver, losing count of his numerous laments that night, resigned himself to running like hell.

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He finally felt safe enough to stop when he reached the promenade on the border of Fuyuki's broad bridge.

"Ha—ha—ha—"

Due to neglect of his fitness, Waver's heart was on the verge of bursting from running such a hellish distance. With no strength

to even stand, he knelt on the roadside, and took another look at the books Rider had stolen from the library.

"... An anthology of Homer's poetry? And ... a world map? Why?" The luxurious hardcover book was from the famous poet of ancient Greece. The thin book was a color print one would use for school.

A stern arm suddenly stretched out from behind the puzzled Waver, picking the atlas up by the fingertips. Once again materialized with a physical body, Rider sat down heavily, crossing his legs on the road, and with a clatter started to turn the pages of the atlas he had taken back from Waver.

"Hey Rider, when you mentioned preparations for war ..."

"You can't start a war without a map. Isn't it obvious?"

Apparently pleased, Rider's face opened in a grin, and he stared at the contents of the atlas.

"So the end of the world has been discovered, and it even rolls up and joins back in a sphere ... I see, that's what we have when we draw the round Earth on paper ..."

To Waver's knowledge, when a Heroic Spirit was summoned as a Servant by the Grail, they received a bit of information to ensure that their knowledge did not conflict with the current era. Even this ancient one should understand that the Earth is round. Waver could not quite understand why Rider had to act like a thief just to get something like a map.

"So ... Hey boy, where are Macedonia and Persia?"

"..."

Rider's usual arrogance in calling his Master "boy" instead of calling him by name disheartened Waver. Still, he pointed his finger at a part of the Atlas map. At that moment—

"Wahhahhahaha!!"

Waver was again dumbstruck by Rider's excited burst of laughter.

"Hahahah! That is small! Such a small area on such a big Earth! Hm, good! I was worried this would be an era with no unknown land anywhere . . . But if it's that big, then there's no problem!"

Rider's laughing voice was grand, a voice that suited his big frame. Waver felt he would rather face an earthquake or a tornado than oppose a man of that size.

"Good, good! I'm excited! . . . And as for us, boy, where are we on this map?"

Nervously, Waver pointed to Japan at the far East. Rider gave a groan of admiration, and,

"Hoho—h, at the opposite of the round Earth . . . Hm. That too is very pleasing. Our objective is even clearer, then." Grimly stroking his chin, he gave a satisfied nod.

". . . Objective?"

"First we go halfway around the globe. Westward, straight west. We take over all the countries on the way. Upon my triumphant return in Macedonia, I will make all the people in my land celebrate my revival. Fufhuhu. How do you like that?"

Momentarily dumbstruck, Waver roared, still dizzy from anger.

"What the hell did you come here for?! The Holy Grail War, the Grail!"

Rider sighed, bored by Waver's threatening attitude.

"But that's just the outset. What's the fuss about—" He seemed to realize something. "—Right, the Grail. I should have asked about that first. Boy, what would you do with the Grail?"

Unable to decipher Rider's slow tone, Waver felt an indescribable chill.

"... Why the change? Why do you ask?"

"I need to make sure. If you too want to conquer the world, then that would make you my enemy, right? There is no need for two supreme rulers."

It was highly unreasonable of the Servant to say that so carelessly over his shoulder, as though turning his back on the Master and his Command Seals, yet Waver shuddered violently from the hints of cruelty in the audacious voice. His overwhelming fear made him forget his fundamental superiority as a Master.

"Th-that's stupid! The world, I don't ..." While choking on his words, Waver suddenly remembered to maintain his dignity. "Conquering the world—Fuh, I have no interest in such a vulgar goal!"

"Hoh?" Rider's expression changed completely. He stared at Waver with great interest.

"For a young man, is there an aspiration greater than wanting the world? That's interesting. Do tell me."

Waver sneered and, with all his courage, spoke haughtily.

"I ... What I wish for, is only to be judged equitably. To renew the impression of my colleagues at Clock Tower, who never acknowledged my talent—"

Before he could finish, an unequaled shock hit Waver. At the same time, he heard Rider roar in his loud voice "That's small!," but the shock and the roar were equally strong, and Waver could not tell them apart. Rider had not actually put more strength into it than he would use for slapping a mosquito, but it was still too overwhelming for the short and fragile magus. Waver spun like a top and collapsed on the ground.

"Small! That's puny! Ridiculous! Is that all the ambition you would risk your life in battle for? And you're my Master? That's really sad!"

Unable to accept it, Rider proclaimed to the magus with an amazed expression, far from anger but practically lamenting.

"A—uh—" Waver had never been confronted with such frankness or violence. Being hit with the truth struck his pride with a pain exceeding what he felt on his cheek. His lips shook with rage and the color drained from his face, but Rider paid it no heed.

"If you want respect from others so much, right . . . I'll tell you boy, use the power of the Grail to grow by a good thirty centimeters. When you have a higher view of things, yeah, you will be looking at most people from above."

"You . . . you . . . u—"

That was his greatest humiliation. A sensation overpowered his feelings of rage; Waver felt a wave of dizziness, almost like anemia, and his whole body trembled. *Unforgivable.* That was plainly unforgivable. That big man, a mere Servant—no more than an attendant—had denied Waver's pride and gotten away with it. Not even a god would forgive such an insult to his dignity.

On Waver's right hand, clenched so tightly his nails could tear into his palm, power flowed into the three seals carved on the back.

"By these Command Spells, Guardian of the order of the Grail, may that man, my Servant—"

May Rider . . . make him . . . what exactly? Of course he had not forgotten. Why he left Clock Tower, why he came to this remote countryside in the far East—to obtain the Grail. He had summoned a Servant for that purpose. Such a crisis could happen twice. After the third time, the Command Seals would be gone; a decisive defeat for a Master. This could not possibly be the first of these serious situations, could it? Barely an hour after the summoning? Ashamed, Waver looked down and breathed deeply several times. With reasoning and calculation, he dispersed the irritation in his heart. Impatience led nowhere. Certainly, Rider's attitude was hardly forgivable, but the Servant had not opposed his Master yet, nor had he disregarded any order. Waver could only brandish his whip three times against this wild beast. Would it not be careless to use it when he was only barked at?

Having regained his composure, Waver finally looked up again. Rider was still sitting on the ground, disparaging his Master. No; rather, he seemed to have forgotten his Master's existence, and was now reading the atlas instead. Waver spoke at the incredible expanse of his back.

"If you can just get the Grail, I have no complaints. I don't care what you do after that. You can fly wherever you want, be it Macedonia or the South Pole."

Fu—m. Rider breathed dispiritedly—or indifferently; one could not tell with his nasal breathing.

"... Anyway. You're sure you have your priorities right? You will participate seriously in the Grail war?"

"Ah, I got it already, yeah." Rider lifted his face from the atlas and looked at Waver from over his shoulder, with a depressed grumble. "The first thing to do is to beat six Heroic Spirits, right? That sounds troublesome, but certainly, without the Grail, I can't start anything. Rest assured. I'll get that treasure."

His speech was calm and composed, but Waver was not completely convinced. Of course, that Heroic Spirit was no deception. As much as Waver could grasp as a Master, the Servant he was granted possessed outstanding abilities.

But in this conflict, Servants did not compete on ability alone; the Holy Grail War was not so single-faceted that one could push on solely with muscles.

"You seem confident, but what're your chances of victory?"

Daringly provocative, Waver put all his effort into this bluff, scowling at Rider. *I am a Master, of course I can afford a high-handed attitude;* such was his train of thought.

"So, you say you want to see my power?" Catching his glance, Rider adopted a quiet tone that made Waver uneasy.

"Yes, that's right. Isn't it obvious? I need proof that I can trust you."

Laughing through his nose, the giant Servant pulled his sword from the scabbard at his waist. It was a valuable sword, splendidly made, but it did not have the prana of a Noble Phantasm. Yet, when Rider took the sword, the dangerous atmosphere slowly

made Waver uneasy. *Could he be thinking of murdering me for my big mouth …?* With no notice of his Master's violent trembling, Rider lifted the naked sword overhead.

"By this one strike, I, Alexander, King of Conquerors, claim supremacy!" Loudly calling out to the empty sky, he violently swung down his blade at the empty space. Just then, a thundering roar and a tremor shook the river bed at night with a magnificent shock, like a thunderbolt. His guts churning, Waver lost his balance and tumbled on the ground for the second time. If Rider's blade had not struck anything, just what did it cut—? Waver saw the empty space torn apart like a gaping mouth, and the absurdly powerful thing that appeared. And Waver remembered the nature of Servants.

A hero's legend is built not only from the man he was, but also from the anecdotes about him and his arms and weapons: all these formed the *symbol* of his existence. Those symbols were the ultimate mysteries that the Servant, the embodiment of the Heroic Spirit, carried as a trump card. Those were the deadly weapons called Noble Phantasms. There was no mistake. The thing which appeared in the empty space Rider struck must be, without a doubt, his Noble Phantasm. Hidden in this existence was a dense, outrageous magical power that could not have come from the realm of normalcy: Waver could grasp as much. It was a miracle that transcended humanity and magecraft.

"… That's how I struck the shaft and got this: An offering to Zeus from King Gordias. The reputation of this must have landed me the Rider class."

Smiling with glowing pride in front of the weapon, Rider did not sound boastful; a sign of regular usage. He seemed to put immense faith in it.

"This is only the beginning. The Noble Phantasm I really rely on is something else entirely. Well, when the opportunity appears, I'll show you—if I meet a formidable opponent worthy of it, that is."

Now awed, Waver viewed Rider in a new light. As a magus, he understood the destructive power of the Noble Phantasm before him. Comparing it to modern-day weaponry, it would rival a strategic bomber. If allowed to run wild, he would transform the whole Shinto area into scorched earth in less than an hour. There was no doubt. Rider here was the strongest Servant Waver had wished for. He might even surpass Waver's imagination. If there was an enemy this man could not defeat, it had to be an existence that could not be taken down even by divine punishment.

"Hey there boy, what's with the pale face? I have not even begun yet." Feeling malicious, Rider spoke to the fallen Master. "If you want the Grail quickly, we should locate one or two Heroic Spirits quickly. I'll immediately trample them. In the meantime, I will kill boredom with this atlas; you're fine with that, right?"

The life drained from his face, Waver slowly nodded.

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Sealed in ice, the Einsbern castle lay at the farthest reaches.

That day, deep in the mountains where people travel not, the old castle, quietly preserving the lives of ancient magi, was released from the snowstorm's clutches. It still could not be reached until the sky had cleared, but it was remarkably brighter compared to days when the sky was whitened with snow. There were no flying birds or green plants on the soil of winter, but light was plenty. On those days, however busy or tired the father was, they would go out together into the forest outside the castle. That was the first unwritten rule between Ilyasviel von Einsbern and Emiya Kiritsugu.

"All right! I will not lose today!" With this exclamation, the excited Ilyasviel quickly ran into the forest before her father. She looked pitiful with her small boots in the thick snow, but her fidgety eyes did not miss any bit of the surrounding trees, never careless for even a second. Right now, the girl was in the midst of a fierce battle with her father.

"Oh, here's one. The first for today."

Hearing the triumphing Kiritsugu behind her, Ilyasviel's surprised eyes turned a shade of anger as she turned around.

"No way! Where? I can't have missed it!"

Smiling boldly to his beloved daughter red with vexation, Kiritsugu pointed at a twig above his head. On a frosted branch of walnut, a humble winter sprout was sticking out.

"Fuhhuhu, I get the first point. Let's keep this rhythm."

"I won't lose! I swear I won't lose today!"

The open competition between father and daughter taking place in this winter forest was a search for the first walnut sprouts in winter. The year's score for Ilya was 12 victories, 9 defeats, 1 tie. The total count for Ilya was 427, against 374 for Kiritsugu. The champion was under heavy pressure.

Ilyasviel had to hurry. Watching over her, Kiritsugu could not stop smiling bitterly. Checking one by one to see which winter sprouts her father had found, the girl could sense her impending doom that day. She may have to reveal her skills.

"Ah, here. Ilya found one too."

Kiritsugu giggled wickedly from behind the merry Ilya.

"Fuhuhu, Daddy found a second one too."

This time, Ilya sprang like a sprayed cat.

"Show me! Show me?!"

Her girlish pride was at stake; she wanted to claim she did not miss anything. Actually, she had not missed any; the one she was up against was childishly cunning. Ilya's expected reaction, ten seconds later, had Kiritsugu suppressing his laughter as he pointed at his "second" winter bud.

"Eh—? That branch doesn't have walnuts, right?"

What Kiritsugu pointed at was a branch Ilya had not considered to be a target until then.

"No no, Ilya, this is a branch of wingnut, a variety of walnut. So that too is the winter bud of a walnut."

Ilyasviel remained silent for two or three seconds, as though tricked by a fox, then shouted with cheeks all red.

"Not fair, not fair not fair not fair! Kiritsugu, that was mean!"

He was indeed unfair. Prior to this, Kiritsugu had been counting the wingnuts with the walnuts; foul play indeed!

"Oh, but if Daddy doesn't do that, he'll never win."

"You can't! It doesn't count if it's a walnut only Kiritsugu knows!"

An angry Ilyasviel started pounding her father's knees.

"Hahaha! But Ilya, isn't it a new opportunity to learn something? Wingnuts aren't edible like walnuts, remember that."

Ilyasviel growled at him, ignoring it.

"If you are so unfair, Ilya won't play with you, Kiritsugu!"

"That bothers me—Sorry, sorry. I apologize."

Faced with the ultimatum, Kiritsugu apologized obediently. With that, Ilyasviel gradually regained her good humor.

"You won't cheat again, you promise?"

"I swear, I swear. The wingnuts are gone."

But I still have the field nuts . . . Kiritsugu snickered silently.

Ilyasviel, who had not yet learned distrust, threw out her chest in pride and nodded in satisfaction at her incorrigible father.

"Fine, then I'll challenge you again. The champion must always accept a challenge."

"Yes. You honor me, Princess."

As a show of allegiance, Kiritsugu played the horse for today's walnut hunt.

"Ahahah! So high!"

Ilyasviel loved riding on her father's shoulders most. Kiritsugu's long legs could cross even the deep snow that Ilyasviel could not walk in. With a higher view, she could also hunt for walnuts more effectively.

"Heeeere we go!"

"Yawohl!"

Kiritsugu burst through a grove, his daughter straddling his neck. Ilyasviel kicked up and laughed merrily from the thrill. Such disdain for her father's shoulders . . . Kiritsugu lamented silently. Having no experience in raising children prior to Ilyasviel's birth, Kiritsugu did not know how they would grow up. But he understood that it was abnormal for his daughter, who turned eight that year, to weigh only fifteen kilograms. Perhaps the inhuman adjustments she received before birth caused it. To Kiritsugu and Irisviel, it was obvious she would be late in reaching adulthood. Would her body turn into an adult's as years pass, or would it not?

No. They had no such hope. Kiritsugu had already concluded his ruthless diagnosis as a magus. There was an eighty to ninety percent chance that Ilyasviel's growth would stop before her secondary sex characteristics appeared. Nonetheless, such a future should not be perceived as ill fortune. She would have plenty of happiness—this wish stemmed from the parents' ego. The pain of that thought, buried in Kiritsugu's chest, proved his love.

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From a castle window, a pair of jade eyes watched over the small figures of the father and daughter, playing at the entrance of the forest.

The young woman standing at the window was far from weak or transient. She had blonde hair, visibly light and soft, and wore

an old styled dress that wrapped her slender physique. It suited a young woman secluded in her room, but the atmosphere stiffened from her mere presence, charged by her intense rigor. Her presence brought not the coldness of ice, but the coolness of a clear pure stream instead. She did not fit the winter scenery of the melancholic Einsbern castle.

"What are you looking at, Saber?"

As Irisviel called, the young woman at the window, Saber, turned around.

"Kiritsugu and your daughter are playing outside in the forest."

Doubtful, perplexed, frowning a little, a stiff expression on her face, her beauty remained undiminished. The slackless serenity of her strained look suited her far more than a hint of humor floating on a smile—she was that sort of rare beauty. Could one believe this young and vivacious presence to be a materialized Heroic Spirit? But she definitely was Saber, one of the seven Heroic Spirits invited by the Grail, in the class of the strongest sword, a full-fledged Servant.

At her side, Irisviel looked through the window. That was the moment Kiritsugu rushed into the forest carrying Ilyasviel on his back.

"It's surprising to see Kiritsugu like that, aren't you?"

Saber nodded honestly to the smiling Irisviel, From her position, she could not see the little girl's face, and only glimpsed the silver hair inherited from her mother. The shrilly voice she heard just before they left her field of vision certainly overflowed with joy; enough for her to guess at the harmony between the frolicking father and daughter.

"To be honest, I was under the impression that my Master was a more cold-hearted person."

At Saber's words, Irisviel gave an embarrassed smile.

"Well, it's not an unreasonable conclusion."

Since her summoning, Saber had not received a single word from her Master Kiritsugu. Ultimately, Servants were only tools to serve their Masters, and magi treated them likewise. Nevertheless, Kiritsugu's attitude toward Saber was too much to bear. He was silent to her, ignored her questions, and barely looked at her; Kiritsugu kept pushing away the Heroic Spirit he himself had summoned. Saber was highly dissatisfied with his attitude, although she did not show it outwardly. Obviously, the Kiritsugu she was contracted to was far different from the man playing with his daughter outside the castle.

"If this is Kiritsugu's true face, then I must have fallen in great disgrace with my Master . . ." As Saber muttered, Irisviel chuckled unintentionally. Her pained face opened true motives, usually hidden behind her handsome profile. Saber became even more unsettled.

"This isn't funny, Irisviel."

". . . I'm sorry. I was wondering if you were still holding a grudge from your summoning."

"A little . . . I understand my appearance differs greatly from expectations, but it should not surprise the two of you much."

Despite her gallant dignity, Saber truly looked like a girl not yet past adolescence. When she appeared in the glowing summoning circle, both Kiritsugu and Irisviel had been struck speechless. That was to be expected. The Heroic Spirit Kiritsugu

was summoning had been recorded in history as a man. The owner of the golden scabbard from Cornwall, the one known as the sole bearer of the holy sword Excalibur—nobody could have guessed that the Heroic Spirit Arthur Pendragon was really a young girl.

"Certainly I have acted as a man, and have wished that lie carried over through history. But it is discomforting that one would doubt I am the owner of this scabbard."

"So you say, but that is inevitable. Your legend is very well known, and it had been dramatized for one thousand five hundred years. There is quite a discrepancy between you and the image we had of King Arthur."

As Irisviel smiled uncomfortably, Saber gave a dissatisfied sigh.

"Of course you would wonder about my appearance. The instant I drew the sword of contract from the stone, I stopped aging through its magic, preserving my apparent youth. My people did not even question my appearance at that time, as I was king. The only thing I was asked to do was fulfill my duty as a king."

How harsh a youth had that been? The kingdom of Britain had been exposed by the invasion of pagans and thrown on the verge of destruction. Following the predictions of a magus, the young king, the incarnation of a dragon, was burdened with the duty of a savior, invincible through ten, or even twelve years of battles. In spite of these feats, the ill-fated ruler's throne was finally usurped by his own blood. He was betrayed, and never forgiven for ending

their glory. The truth that such a delicate girl had been burdened with so violent, so painful a fate weighed on Irisviel's heart.

"Does Kiritsugu . . . hate me for my womanhood? Because I am not worthy to hold a sword?"

Saber muttered in a dry voice, watching Kiritsugu disappear into the forest afar; it touched Irisviel's heart.

"No. He understands your power. That man isn't such a brute that he would misjudge a Heroic Spirit of the Saber class. There must be another reason for his anger."

"He was angry?" Saber reacted to what she heard. "Do you mean I made Kiritsugu angry? I don't understand. I have not spoken with him even once."

"Then it could be something unrelated to you. What he is angry at must be the legend of the King Arthur that was told to us."

If the Heroic Spirit Kiritsugu summoned had been the grown man King Arthur that the legend told of, he probably would not have rejected his Servant this severely. Simply put, for him, who kept his personal feelings separate, discussions were best kept to the required minimum. In essence, his daring disregard was the result of a highly emotional response. The one who removed the sword embedded in the stone was a young girl; that truth which Kiritsugu had just learned was the cause of his open indignation at the legend of King Arthur.

"He must be angry at the people who surrounded you in your era, at the cruelty of those who forced the duty of a king on a small girl."

"That was not the case. I had been prepared ever since I pulled the sword from the stone."

Saber declared without reserve, her expression still cool and clear. Troubled, Irisviel gave a short nod.

"... The fact that you accepted such a fate just like that is all the more provocative to him. Perhaps it is the reason he is angry at you, the girl named Arturia."

"..." Saber briefly lowered her eyes, unable to answer. But when she looked up again, her eyes were still as obstinate.

"That is overreacting. No one would have complained to those who made the decision, in my era."

"And that is why he remained silent."

Against Irisviel's fast answer, Saber could only falter, having no ready reply this time.

"I, Emiya Kiritsugu, am definitely incompatible with the Heroic Spirit Arturia—I'll leave it at that. Any attempt to talk will only end in mutual denial." Irisviel could only agree. Spending time with this proud Heroic Spirit, Kiritsugu would only find their minds too different from each other's. She could understand each side's complaint, and had as much compassion for each. That these two would never agree was, again, Irisviel's resigned conclusion.

"I thank you, Irisviel. Without a woman like you, I might have lost this Grail War without even fighting."

"The same to you. I want my husband to be the one to reach the Grail."

Fearing that incompatibility with the Heroic Spirit Arturia, Kiritsugu had come up with an unthinkable solution to this deadlock. Servant and Master would act in complete separation.

There was no range limit on the Servant—Master contract. Whatever the distance, a Command Spell could control the Servant, and prana could be supplied as well, unless the Master was unconscious. Master and Servant stayed in close proximity only on mutual understanding. Prudence dictated that battle decisions were not to be left only to the Servant; the Master had to remain on the battle scene to control the Servant. Of course, Kiritsugu's independent actions, carried out without knowledge of Saber's actions, did not mean that he trusted her completely; he had entrusted to Irisviel the duty of overseeing Saber's actions as his agent.

That was not as reckless as it seemed. For instance, if Kiritsugu's Servant were to rebel, there was no fear that she would kill Irisviel, so long as she still wished for the Grail. Without Irisviel, even if Saber managed to defeat all the other Servants, she would not be able to reach the Grail. The vessel of the Grail that Irisviel carried was absolutely necessary for the Grail of Fuyuki to materialize. Therefore, Saber had to defend Irisviel from the other Masters.

The irregular team formation was decided based solely on Kiritsugu's and Saber's respective battle tactics. The Heroic Spirit of the Knight, Saber, was a fighter with Servant abilities and Noble Phantasm properties geared for full frontal battle; she would never consent to any makeshift strategy that did not fit that. On the other hand, her Master, Emiya Kiritsugu, was essentially a hitman who planned clever schemes, and there was no possibility of the two of them ever coordinating anything extraordinary. Rather, as far as affinities go, Kiritsugu evaluation

was that Irisviel would be a much better fit as Saber's partner. His wife, though a homunculus outcast, was still of the noble Einsbern family, and possessed a natural elegance and dignity from her upbringing. Irisviel definitely was the kind of lady a knight would devote his loyalty to.

In fact, within a few days of living together after the summoning, Irisviel and Saber had developed a mutual understanding and respect. The natural air of nobility Irisviel held was that of a princess of Saber's own era, and Saber's nobility was a perfect match with Irisviel's fine breeding. Therefore, the contractual Master, Kiritsugu, proposed that his wife Irisviel act as a substitute Master in his stead. It was a proposal Saber easily accepted. Her problem really was that she felt uneasy cooperating with Kiritsugu. But having Irisviel as a substitute Master would be a more appropriate alternative than simply letting her swing her sword freely; that much was agreed upon. The two of them were under a master-and-servant relationship in accordance to the oath of a knight, different from the Servant contract; this was how they were now preparing for Heaven's Feel.

"Irisviel, what kind of person do you see Kiritsugu as?"

"He is a guide as well as a husband, and the one who gave meaning to my life. But that's not what you were asking, is it?"

Saber nodded. What she wanted to know was not Irisviel's subjective opinion, but about the other side of Emiya Kiritsugu which she did not know.

"Truthfully, he is a kind person. Only, because he was too kind, he could not forgive the cruelty of the world. He chose to be even more cold-hearted to fight against it."

"I can understand such determination. A standpoint any less principled would require discarding human sensitivity."

At this, one could not help but think that Kiritsugu and Saber were much alike. Perhaps Kiritsugu's disgust toward the Heroic Spirit Arthur was similar.

"To save the world with the power of the Grail—is that what you are saying? What you and Kiritsugu wish for."

"Yes. Mine is only a reflection of his wish, though. But I do think it is something worth risking your life for."

At Irisviel's words, Saber nodded, her eyes ablaze as well.

"The wish I have for the Grail is also similar. I want to help the Britain I could not save by myself. I think what you and Kiritsugu want is right. It is a path to be proud of."

"Right . . ." Smiling, Irisviel replied ambiguously. Pride—that was precisely the problem.

Her husband's words came back in Irisviel's mind—the true reason Kiritsugu and Saber behaved so differently. *"The two of you will be flowers on the battleground. Never run away or hide yourselves. Shine, that nobody may look away from the Servant Saber. Because those who look at Saber will be turning their backs to me."* Kiritsugu had no intention of leaving the battle to Irisviel and Saber. Rather, he intended to actively influence the progress of the war by his own means. He would be an assassin sneaking up from behind the enemy, and Saber would play the lure who made his trap certain; no more than a feint.

Irisviel could not say anything, but it was clear what methods Kiritsugu would adopt once the war started. What would the

proud and honest knight think about that . . .? Irisviel grew increasingly worried the more she thought about it.

"Irisviel, you have a deep understanding of your husband Kiritsugu, and much faith in him as well."

Unaware of Irisviel's melancholy, Saber watched the harmony of father and daughter through the window.

"From that viewpoint, the two of you appear to be a pretty normal couple seeking happiness. But if Kiritsugu thinks that I, in the same way, should have sought happiness as a person and not as a king . . . . They are both the same wish we cannot help but have."

". . . So you don't have a grudge against him anymore?"

"Of course I don't."

With a delicate face, Saber nodded, and Irisviel felt a twinge of betrayal.

"But—Irisviel, is it all right? To tell me about something like that."

"Eh?"

Asking again, Saber's eyes seemed to want to tell more. "I mean—you will need to accept leaving your daughter, just like Kiritsugu. Tomorrow . . . Won't we be flying to Japan for the Grail?"

"Ah, that. It's fine. There is no need for me to part with my child." Irisviel smiled peacefully in a show of gratitude for Saber's anxiety, but the lonely hollowness of that smile troubled her instead.

"If I cease to exist as Irisviel, it does not mean I will disappear. When she grows up, I am sure she will understand, because she is an Einsbern woman like me."

"..."

She could not grasp Irisviel's enigmatic words, but Saber's face stiffened at the sinister omen she could feel hidden in them.

"Irisviel, you will definitely survive. I will protect you until the end. I swear it on the pride of my sword."

The knight's solemn statement made Irisviel smile brightly.

"Saber, attain the Grail—for yourself, and for your Master. Then the Einsberns will achieve their thousand-year desire, and my daughter and I will be freed from our destiny. We can only rely on you, Arturia."

Again, Saber could not comprehend the meaning behind Irisviel's anxious smile. Her snow-glittering hair, and her radiant beauty—this woman filled with warm kindness, what fate was she bound to? For the knight, the complete revelation of the truth was yet to come.

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The hunt for winter buds of wingnuts ended with Ilyasviel's victory, bringing to a close three consecutive defeats for the champion. No field nut trees were found in the Einsbern forest. The battle now over, the two strolled back. After their walk deep into the forest, the majestic Einsbern castle had become a silhouette in the haze.

"Let's do this again next time when you return from Japan, Kiritsugu."

Having obtained her revenge, Ilyasviel looked up at her father with a wide smile. Unable to look straight at her, Kiritsugu feigned serenity as best as he could.

"Yes, certainly . . . . Next time, Daddy won't lose."

"Uhuhu, if you don't improve, we'll soon be a hundred points apart, you know?"

The smile of his beloved daughter was becoming too much of a burden for the man. *Just how should I tell her?* Perhaps that would be his only thought until the end. Kiritsugu now faced his worst struggle, one he had to win by any means. He could not afford to give up his life. Their promise to play again in the forest was only a small victory.

Save everything. Abandon everything for that. To the man who had sworn to do that, love was a thorn. Loving anyone was a curse, to be kept hidden in his heart. That was the fate which burdened Emiya Kiritsugu in exchange for his ideal, a torture which could not be healed. *Then why?* He questioned himself as he looked at the sky and earth, both frozen white. Why did he love so much that one woman and the child he shared his blood with?

"Kiritsugu, how long will your work with Mother be? When will you return?" Unaware of his suffering, Ilyasviel asked in a lively voice.

"Daddy will come back in a couple of weeks, probably. As for Mommy, that should be much longer, I think . . ."

"Yeah. Mommy told Ilya; that we would part forever."

Her reply, delivered without a shadow on her face, was the finishing blow for Kiritsugu. His knees lost the strength to push through the snow-covered path. His wife was ready, his daughter was prepared—for the truth: that Emiya Kiritsugu was snatching the young girl's mother away from her.

"Mother told me that even if we wouldn't see each other anymore, she would always be by my side. I don't have to be sad, she has been telling me, before going to bed. So Ilya will always be with mother."

"... I see ..."

At that point, Kiritsugu was acutely aware of the blood which stained his hands crimson red. He did not know how many he had killed, or how impure his arms were. To hold a child as a father, that was unforgivable, he told himself. But that would be running away, would it not? This child would never know a mother's embrace again. If her father abandoned that duty as well ... Who would hold her again?

"—Hey, Ilya."

Kiritsugu stopped his daughter who was walking beside him, dropped to his knees, and wrapped his arms around her.

"... Kiritsugu?"

In these eight years, each time he held that small body in his arms, Kiritsugu doubted his fatherhood deep inside. Disgusted by his act as a father, he could only scorn himself for being unable to do otherwise. But this too was reaching an end. As the child's only father, he must hold her in the warmth of his arms, without running away, without lying.

"Will you wait for me, Ilya? Can you stand being alone until Daddy comes back?"

"Yes! I will bear it. I'll wait for you with Mommy, Kiritsugu."

Memories of this day would probably fill Ilyasviel with joy until the end. Her cheerful voice harbored no grief.

"... Then Daddy will promise you something too. I won't make you wait. Daddy will definitely come back quickly."

Emiya Kiritsugu had taken on another heavy burden. Enduring the thorns of love that pierced his entire body, he tightly embraced his child for what seemed like an eternity.

– 222:24:48

Uryuu Ryuunosuke disliked splatter movies. He understood the need for that kind of amusement, though. Horror movies, war movies, adventure movies and dramas; why does fiction tirelessly paint man's death so? Perhaps spectators minimize their fear of death by observing a fictitious imitation of it. Humans pride themselves on wisdom, and dread ignorance. If they can experience and comprehend a given fear, a resemblance of victory is accomplished in overcoming that fear.

However, death simply cannot be experienced while one is still alive. It is therefore impossible to understand its true meaning. Humans can only guess at the essence of death by observing the death of others, and making up their own virtual experience of it. Indeed, for civilized society to respect human life, this virtual experience could only rely on fiction. After all, when war is turning your neighbors into minced meat through bombing and land mines, one would not be watching horror movies.

Similarly, it is important to be entertained by fictional physical pain, mental stress or any kind of sorrow. When experiencing bodily sensations in person becomes too risky, one can overcome and remove that uneasiness by observing those who taste those sensations—that is why a silver screen or a cathode-ray tube can bring tears of screams, grief and anguish.

That is good. That is understandable. Ryuunosuke once feared death like any ordinary person. By watching the special make-up of slaughtered bodies, the red ink of blood splashes and the

realistic act of reproducing a stale death with screams, death was minimized and fear was overcame; Ryuunosuke was an amateur horror movie viewer. Depiction of cruelty in fiction has a bad influence on young people—that much can be said; but to Uryuu Ryuunosuke, this was ridiculous nonsense. If the blood and screams in splatter horror had been even a little more realistic, he might not have become a homicidal maniac. This was, really, nothing but the result of an earnest curiosity.

Ryuunosuke had to find out what *death* was. The vivid red of the hemorrhagic artery; the touch and the warmth of the abdominal cavity's contents; the agony of the victim, as the aforementioned things are removed until he is dead; the musical tone of his screams. They were beyond compare.

People say murder is a crime, but think about it. Were there not five billion humans crowding this Earth? Ryuunosuke knew well how outrageous a number that was, because he counted the grains of gravel in the park when he was a kid. To no surprise, he got discouraged at ten thousand, but he did not forget the frustration he felt then. And there were five hundred thousand times more humans than that!

Furthermore, it was said that the number of births and deaths everyday could be counted in tens of thousands. What weight could Ryuunosuke bear on society by becoming a murderer? Besides, by killing one by one, Ryuunosuke could perfect each death thoroughly. On occasion, he enjoyed ensuring that the process of dying took up to half a day. With this incentive and experience, the volume of information learned from one death could be much more important, compared to what you get by

living a life too short. By Uryuu Ryuunosuke's reasoning, could you not say that homicide was a more productive pursuit?

Living by this creed, Ryuunosuke wandered around in various places, committing murders. He did not fear the law. The feeling of being imprisoned and handcuffed—however many men it would actually require for that—was something he understood enough not to fear; he had observed enough deaths, by hanging or on the electric chair. His reason for escaping the law was simple: there was nothing to gain in being deprived of freedom, or from life in prison. Living a life of seeking pleasure every day was far preferable, and it was the right choice for any healthy man.

He was satisfied to squeeze the most out of his victims' life force, out of their emotions—anger, affection, and the attachment to human life. Satisfied to let his victims know the exact time and circumstance of their death—that in itself held deep meaning, with the richness of miniaturized life. Placed on the verge of death, common folk often behaved uncommonly, while exceptional ones died in a more banal way. Observing such patterns in humans, Ryuunosuke pursued the study of death.

Though an expert in the matter of death, he also studied its counterpart, life. The more he killed, the more he understood the lives he took. That knowledge, that discernment in itself was a kind of dignity—a style. Although Ryuunosuke could not find words to accurately explain why he had that power, if he had to sum it up, his reason would be "to be cool."

He could not get used to just any playground, losing himself without knowing his place, without understanding his amusement. But as one who accumulated experience and adopted

a rule of conduct, he was like a regular customer, welcome in a place where he could steer the mood toward intimacy; that was what it meant to be cool as a way of life. So to speak, Ryuunosuke was a genuine player when it came to getting comfortable in the seat of human life. He could look for victims, savoring a cocktail of new methods, appreciating the taste of satisfaction.

This was no metaphor. At night, Ryuunosuke took pleasure in his excellence at attracting victims, like a light trap for insects, using a certain interest in the opposite sex. Women were charmed by the composure and dignity that his enigmatic posture radiated. After the seduction, he would enjoy some alcohol, and the girls he really got into ended up as bloody pieces of meat. The town at night was Ryuunosuke's hunting ground, and the prey never noticed the menace that was Ryuunosuke.

Once, he saw a leopard in an animal program, and was enchanted by its elegance. He felt a connection with the brilliant *modus operandi* of the hunt. The leopard was literally the beast, living a cool way of life that became his model. Since then, Ryuunosuke became self-conscious of his image as a leopard. He always wore clothes with leopard-related features—jacket or pants, shoes or hat. If he felt that too showy, he even had socks or underwear, handkerchiefs or gloves with leopard prints. He had an amber-colored cat's-eye ring which was always in his pocket, even when he could not slip it on his middle finger, and he always carried a pendant made from a real fang.

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This murderer named Uryuu Ryuunosuke had recently met with a depressive bout of undermotivation. After some thirty victims, his methods for execution and torture had started losing their freshness; they all seemed the same. Testing all the techniques he could come up with, witnessing their dying agony, teasing his prey—these had already lost the flavor of excitement and stimulation they once had.

Deciding to return home after five years, Ryuunosuke broke into the backyard storehouse late at night after his parents were asleep. It was in this storehouse, crumbling and abandoned, that he had taken his first victim.

Meeting again for the first time in five years, he found his sister's body completely changed, but she still waited for her brother at the place Ryuunosuke had hidden it. The silent meeting with his sister brought on no particularly strong emotions, and Ryuunosuke was disappointed that he had come for nothing. Right then, he found a rotten old book in the mountain of junk crammed in the warehouse. The thin, worm-eaten book was not a printed copy but an individual note. The postscript read "ninth year of the Keiou era." The writing was more than a hundred years old, dating back to the end of the Bakumatsu.

Having occasionally tapped into Chinese books in his student days, Ryuunosuke managed to read the note without much difficulty; the problem lay with its contents. The incoherent script of thin characters was preposterous nonsense about some kind of dark magic. The inscriptions involved Christianity and Satanism, and apparently was about some western occults. Offering human

sacrifices to otherworldly demons to invoke spirits; it was definitely fiction.

In the dying hours of the Edo era, the study of western knowledge was considered heresy. While a book about the occult —the most heretic of heresies—could only be a prank, Ryuunosuke held some admiration for it, and cared little about its authenticity. It was already quite cool and funky just to keep that old book about the occult. It was enough of a stimulus to renew his inspiration as a homicidal maniac. At once, Ryuunosuke made the place a "spiritual ground" as described in the notes, and resumed his night-time reading. He did not know what meaning the town now called Fuyuki had, but Ryuunosuke set up the stage for new killings anyway, keeping in mind important points of the mood. He followed the instructions of the old book as faithfully as he could.

When he first sacrificed a girl who had run off to play in an abandoned factory at night, the stimulus was more interesting than he expected. The style of the sacrificial ritual captivated Ryuunosuke completely, despite his inexperience. He became infatuated with the method, and after three failed attempts, the peaceful provincial city was struck with fear.

In the same manner, Uryuu Ryuunosuke broke into the house of a four-person family for the fourth crime. By then, he was completely intoxicated with ecstasy in the midst of the crime, and of course he started cooling off after repeating the same crime for the fourth time. The voice of reason in his head started whispering in his ears.

Ryuunosuke committed crimes as he wandered all over the country. He never killed twice at the same spot, and always disposed of the body scrupulously. Most of Ryuunosuke's victims were, even now, being searched for as missing persons. But this time, a series of crimes that broke out, without the usual hiding of remains, warned people quickly. It was folly on Ryuunosuke's part; obsessed with his method, he had completely forgotten his usual prudence. This one was particularly bad. With the previous three victims, he had tried to draw the magic circle with blood, but mistakes resulted in a shortage of blood, so this time he had decided to kill a little more than usual so he could draw a perfect circle. Slaughtering a whole sleeping family turned out to be a little too sensational. The police were in a frenzy, and the region was on its toes.

But going into hiding was not a leopard's style of doing things. Ryuunosuke finally decided. He would leave the city of Fuyuki alone. for the time being He would stick with the black mass as he quite liked the result, but he would have to reduce the number, from three to one at a time, to be safe. Having sorted out his thoughts, a renewed Ryuunosuke decided to concentrate on the ritual again.

"♪ Fill, fill, filling, fill. With each repetition, four times—eh, five times? Err, only when it's full, break it up . . . Is it? Yeah." Reciting the summoning chant, Ryuunosuke drew on the wooden floor of the living room with his bloody brush. The ceremony was serious business; the ambience did not fit Ryuunosuke's style. After all, the serious mood was only for personal satisfaction; what was most important was the *feeling*. Having practiced

drawing the magic circle all night, he could now draw it in one go. There was no need for reserves anymore, although he had already killed the parents and the eldest daughter to draw their blood.

"♪ Fill, fill, filling, filling, fill, there. That's five times all right. Okay?"

The leftover blood seemed suitable for some fine art on the walls of the room. Waiting for a reaction, he turned toward the last survivor rolled up in the corner, a grade school boy gagged with a rope. The young kid was crying, his eyes swollen as he looked at his torn-up sister and parents.

"Say—boy, do you believe in demons?"

Asking the shivering kid, Ryuunosuke tilted his head dramatically. Obviously, he did not expect a reply: with his mouth gagged, all the kid could do was tremble in fear.

"You know, newspapers and magazines keep calling me a demon. But ain't it weird? A single stick of dynamite would at once cause more victims than I could."

Kids are nice. Ryuunosuke liked kids. Frightened adults would cry and scream, so in that respect kids really were better. You could just laugh it off when they get incontinent.

"Nah, it's fine. I'm kind of a demon. But if there were real demons besides me, I'd like to try to talk a little with them. Now that'd be nice. 'Hi, the name's Uryuu Ryuunosuke, I'm a demon!' how does that sound for an introduction? That should be a good opportunity to make sure of it. If real demons exist or not . . ."

His good humor improving, Ryuunosuke tested his charm on the trembling kid. He normally found it annoying to talk, but the sight of blood and a person on the verge of death seemed to

change him, and he became more loquacious. The blood of three people was enough; that was his only reason for letting the youngest child live. Though he did think of taking the time to enjoy killing him later, after the completion of the ceremony—

"Anyway. If by any chance, a demon really comes out, wouldn't it be stupid to not have anything to drink and chat about? So, boy . . . If Mr Demon here does pay me a visit, how about a little killing?"

". . .!"

The young kid grasped the idea well enough. Ryuunosuke beamed when the kid, eyes wide open, started twisting and struggling around without a scream.

"I wonder what it's like to be killed by a demon. Will it go *zip*, or *splash?* That's gonna be some fun to watch. Not something you see everyday—ah ouch!" The unexpected sting was like a cold shower, raining on Ryuunosuke's frenzy.

—The back of his right hand. He felt an intense pain, as though his hand were bathed in powerful poison. Just as soon as the pain started, the swelling calmed down and stuck to the surface of his skin.

". . . What the hell? This . . ."

Somehow, a tattoo-like pattern had appeared on his pained right hand, and he had no idea why.

". . . Eeh." Instead of feeling anxious, Ryuunosuke reacted dandily. That incomprehensible pattern of three intertwined snakes resembled some tribal tattoo, and did not look half-bad. But his foppishness lasted only a moment; Ryuunosuke turned around in surprise when he felt the air move behind him.

The air grew hot; A current that should not be possible indoors could be felt. Soon, the breeze changed into a whirlwind, blowing in the living room. Ryuunosuke stared at the magic circle, drawn on the floor with fresh blood, as it started emitting a phosphorescent light unbelievably. He did expect some sort of abnormality to occur, but such a blatant phenomenon was beyond his anticipation. Something big, just like in the horror movies Ryuunosuke despised. The childish effects were so laughable it was not even funny, but it was definitely real.

The violent gust now trampled the room, blowing away the TV, the flower vase and the other furniture. In the center of the magic circle, a mist now rose, and sparks scattered. The scene was otherworldly, but Uryuu Ryuunosuke was definitely not scared; he was a child staring at a magic trick, his chest dancing in expectation, harboring a renewed fascination for the unknown. The enchantment he once discovered in the marvel called death; a radiance that faded unnoticed when he tired of murder, right now —

A flash. Then a roaring sound like a thunderbolt. The impact ran through Ryuunosuke's body. It felt like being fried by a high-tension current. The strange power once passed through the Uryuu family. Now forgotten by its descendants, but still carried in their blood, uninterrupted, the Magic Circuits had been sleeping inside Ryuunosuke until this day; this inherited mystery was now unleashed like a tidal wave. And that alien power flowing in Ryuunosuke had just started running in him, before streaming back outside to the thing invited from the other world.

This was an exception among exceptions.

The Grail of Fuyuki required seven Servants. The ones who would summon Servants and try to become Masters were not necessarily capable mages. The Grail would pick appropriate persons until the count reached seven. The summoning of a Servant was also fundamental for the Grail. The hard work that magi put into the ritual was only a precautionary measure to create a bond with a perfect, reliable Servant. Even with an unskilled summoning circle and without chanting the spell, if a human had a catalyst, the requirements for summoning the Grail could be met.

"—I ask of you . . ."

From within the enveloping haze, a soft yet strangely carrying voice called out. The wind had stopped, unnoticed. The light left the magic circle, the radiance disappearing, and the circle drawn on the floor with fresh blood blackened, as though burnt. From within the fading mist, the voice suddenly showed his figure to Ryuunosuke.

A young face without a single crease. A pair of large, hollow eyes, and greasy cheeks. These features, along with the deathly pallor of his face, reminded Ryuunosuke of a painting from Munch. His garments, too, were quite odd. His figure, tall enough to reach the clouds, was wrapped in a robe multiply folded, and decorated with luxurious latches made of precious metals; his whole style looked exactly like an evil magician from a manga.

"You who called for me, you who requested me, summoning the spirit of the Caster class . . . I ask for your name. Who are you?"

". . ."

Ryuunosuke gave a small response. The one who had come out of the summoning circle, with great flashes and smokes, was an ordinary human; that was definitely not what he had expected. No exaggerated monster, just a perfectly normal human? Ryuunosuke was puzzled. His clothes were definitely queer, but did that mean this man was a real demon? Scratching his head for a moment, Ryuunosuke decided.

"Uh, the name's Uryuu Ryuunosuke. I'm a freelancer. My hobby in general is murder. I like kids and young women. Recently, I'm going back to sharpening my fundamentals again."

The man in robe nodded. Apparently he had ignored everything apart from the name.

"Very well. The contract is complete. Your desire for the Holy Grail is my desire as well. We shall make the cauldron of heaven ours."

"Holy—Grail?"

At the moment, Ryuunosuke did not yet understand what it was about. . . . Right. Come to think of it, didn't that old book in the storehouse mention something like that? To think I had skipped it because the passage was dull . . .

". . . Yeah well, let's save the troublesome talk for later."

Ryuunosuke waved his hand lightly, before pointing with his chin at the kid curled up in the corner.

"For now, let's talk over a drink. Won't you eat that?"

The other man, with a face as expressionless as a mask, gauged the tied-up kid and Ryuunosuke. Feeling anxious, Ryuunosuke could not tell from the silence if his words and intentions had hit

home. Perhaps that was asking too much. After all, who decided that demons always ate children?

Silently, the man picked a book from a pocket of his robe. The bulky book appeared to be an antique treasure from an ancient era. No doubt it was some demonic gadget. Ryuunosuke noticed at a glance what hide the cover was made of.

"Ah, cool! That's human skin, right?"

Ryuunosuke recognized it because he once tried to put up a lamp shade with human skin pelt from a victim. He got discouraged at his poor handicraft midway, and could not help but respect an elder who had successfully achieved the same effect.

The man, only casting a glance at Ryuunosuke, ignored his compliment and gently opened the book, his hand rapidly flipping through the pages. He then muttered one or two words that made no sense, and closed the book before putting it back in his pocket, his work seemingly accomplished.

"...?"

Leaving the helpless Ryuunosuke, the man walked toward the boy rolled up on the floor. After the strange events that had happened, the boy winced harder as though his death were inevitable, trying to crawl away from the man. Looking at the child in such a state, the man suddenly seemed full of compassion and kindness, which startled Ryuunosuke. What does that mean?

"—You have nothing to be afraid of, my boy."

Contrary to his odd appearance, the strange man gently spoke to the boy. The imprisoned kid gradually noticed his warmth, and looked at the man questioningly. In reply, the man gave a smiling

nod, bent toward the boy and extended his hand to him, gently untying his ropes and gag.

"Can you stand?"

In encouragement, the man patted the boy on the back, helping him up. Of course, Ryuunosuke had no doubt the man was a devil, but he was dissatisfied with the way he was treating the child. Was he actually going to let him live? No matter how one looked at him, the man was queer. When silent, his features looked dreadful, like the face of a corpse, yet when smiling without any apparent malice, he seemed as pure as a saint.

"Now, my boy, the door over there will lead you out of this room. Don't look around; walk straight ahead, by yourself. Can you do that?"

"... Yes ..."

At the boy's brave nod, the man responded with a bright smile, softly pushing him on the back. The boy ran lightly across the bloodstained living room, his eyes avoiding the corpses of both his parents and his sister, as instructed.

"Hum, hey ..."

Ryuunosuke could not ignore it, and spoke; the man quickly interrupted him with a hand sign. Overpowered, Ryuunosuke helplessly watched as the kid escaped. The boy opened the door and stepped into the corridor. The entraceway was now in front of him. His eyes, drowned in fear before, were now shinning again with hope and relief.

The climax came the next instant. The boy left the stairs behind, running toward the entranceway. From the second floor, unseen from the living room, something suddenly swooped down

in an avalanche on the young boy. A bundle of heavy ropes—no, a flock of countless snakes—an indescribable life form, or rather, a living creature entwined itself around the boy's whole body, and with an otherworldly force took the young body up to the second floor. Then a soul-rending scream, the clicking tongues of an uncountable number of creatures, and the sound of small bones being crushed. The rashness of whatever was happening on the upper floor easily stimulated the imagination even without vision.

The strange man closed his eyes and raised his face, listening to the nightmarish sound, drunk in attention. His hand shivered; he seemed to be deeply moved. But the emotion was just as great for Ryuunosuke . . . No; as he had not expected something like that to happen, the catharsis was far more intense for him.

"There is a certain freshness in fear."

The lingering memory of the horror he had planned out himself had not drawn out yet—there was now no remaining doubt that he was a devil—when he started speaking in an entranced dream-like voice.

"Fright is about the feeling of impending death. The true meaning of terror does not lie in static emotion, but in change—this is the instant when hope is turned into despair. How was it? The smell of fresh fear and death?"

"—Kh—"

Ryuunosuke was at loss of words. The *thing* feasting on the kid's remains upstairs was, apparently, the man's doing. He was the one who had appeared from the bloody magic circle, after all. There was no doubt something had happened when he had opened his book bound in human skin. The method was nerve-racking,

but that was what made the philosophy splendid. Ryuunosuke was no match for the creativity and perfect aesthetic of such evilness. He, who held such a vivid and moving aesthetic of death, deserved the greatest praise.

"Cool! That's wicked! Man, that was super cool!"

Feeling like dancing with joy, Ryuunosuke grabbed the man's hand and shook it. Making friends with this strange man was no less moving than meeting a celebrity. The mass murderer Uryuu Ryuunosuke finally felt adoration and respect from the depth of his heart for someone in this boring world.

"Okay! I don't know about this Grail thing, but I'll follow you! I'll help you in whatever you want. We'll kill more. There are plenty of sacrifices. Show me more of your cool killings!"

"You are a pleasant fellow." Understanding Ryuunosuke's emotion, the man replied gently to his violent handshake with a pure smile.

"Ryuunosuke, was it? It is a good omen that I got a Master as understanding as you. This is developing more and more into an ideal situation for my aspirations."

When a summoning was made without a catalyst, the Heroic Spirit would be one with a mindset similar to the Master's. The one summoned by this vicious murderer was one who had left his name on extremely cruel acts; he was a Heroic Spirit with a taste for true tyranny. Based on his nature, it would be more suitable to call him a Vengeful Spirit instead.

"Ah—right, I didn't get to hear your name." Remembering the important parts, Ryuunosuke started acting with greater familiarity.

"My name, yes. Indeed. For this era, you could call me . . ."

The man put a finger to his lips, and after some thought,

". . . You can call me 'Bluebeard'. Pleased to meet you." He replied familiarly with an angelic smile.

Thus, in the last position of the fourth Heaven's Feel, the Master and his Servant, Caster, completed the contract. This is how, without knowing the meaning of the Grail War or his nature as a magus, a casual murderer received Command Seals and a Servant. For a trick of fate, this may be the foulest play of all.

– 172:38:15

The saying about the hour when even trees sleep did not apply to magi and Servants. The Heroic Spirit of the Shadows, Assassin, had a better grasp than anyone else on the complexity of being prepared during the darkness of the night. The magi gathered in the city of Fuyuki had dual interests. Standing on the hill of Miyama town, neither of the western-styled houses of Matou and Tousaka fell behind in splendor.

Both Masters aiming for the Grail, the two landlords had lately been using low-grade familiars to patrol their castles left and right, day and night. Naturally, the master of the mansion must be ready, spreading a multitude of bounded fields around for detection and defense, even inside the mansion; it must be a stronghold in the magical sense. Stepping unauthorized into the bounded fields was all but safe, all the more so for the large mass of prana that was a Servant. It would be impossible to slip through the bounded fields of the fortress undetected, even for a spiritual body.

However, the impossible could always be made possible. That was the Presence Concealment skill of the Assassin class. Though he did not possess excellent battle power, Assassin could suppress his prana emission to nothing, to creep in the shadows and reach his target. For this Assassin—Kotomine Kirei's Servant—the night's infiltration operation was especially easy.

The garden he was now sneaking into was not the Matou mansion's, which had been considered enemy territory for some

time. It was the mansion of Tousaka Tokiomi, who was his Master Kirei's ally until just yesterday. Of course, Assassin too had agreed with Kirei and Tokiomi to deceive the other Masters and remain undercover. Obeying that secret agreement, he had undertaken the guarding of the Tousaka mansion on countless occasions. Knowing all about the disposition of the bounded fields, he was naturally aware of the blind spot. In his spiritual form, Assassin progressed through the many alarm fields without a problem, laughing at the ironic fate of Tousaka Tokiomi. That arrogant magus had placed a considerable faith in his protégé Kirei, but could not imagine he might be bitten by his own dog.

Kirei's order to murder Tokiomi had reached Assassin less than an hour ago. He was unsure of what caused Kirei to change his mind, but Tokiomi's summoning of a Servant a few days ago must be when it began. Tokiomi seemed to have summoned the Servant Archer, but apparently, that Heroic Spirit must have been weaker than Kirei expected. The merit of cooperation with Tokiomi had faded; he agreed with the decision Kirei made this night.

"Vain prudence is unnecessary. Have no fear of facing Archer. You need to obliterate Tousaka Tokiomi quickly." That was the order of his Master Kirei. Against the despised weakest fighter Assassin, he would not be afraid and would not hurry. It should be easy to betray the miscalculations of the Heroic Spirit Archer summoned by Tousaka Tokiomi.

Halfway through the garden, the blind spot of the bounded field vanished. From there on, the barrier had to be destroyed by physical means, and one had to progress while removing it. It was impossible to proceed while invisible in spirit form. Leaning over

the shadow of the vegetation, Assassin returned from spirit form to physical form, exposing his bony mask and tall, lean figure. He could feel many eyes all over him from afar, different ones from the bounded field of the Tousaka residence. The familiars of other Masters must be observing the Tousaka residence from outside the barriers. As long as he remained unnoticed to Tokiomi himself, there was no need to worry about peeping Toms. Tokiomi's rivals for the Grail would never warn him of Assassin's infiltration. If one competitor dropped, the others would remain as unconcerned spectators.

Snickering without a sound, Assassin extended his hand at the first keystone binding the barri—The next instant, that hand was pierced by a spear flying from above, shining like a flash of lightning.

"... H?!"

Intense pain, terror, and above all, shock. The simple spear strike was completely unexpected, and Assassin swung his head upward, looking for the thrower—no, there was no need to search. On top of the roof of the Tousaka residence, a golden shadow stood magnificently. The divine radiance stole even the dignity of the starlit sky, and put the moon to shame. The rage of being wounded made Assassin forget the pain, but he could only fear the overwhelming coercion.

"You worm crawling on the ground, whose pardon do you seek?"

The golden man asked indifferently at Assassin hidden on the ground, looking down at him with a pair of disdainful, burning crimson eyes.

"Do not look at me! Worms, the lowly creatures that they are, may look only at the ground when they die."

Around the golden shadow, more glows appeared, growing to a countless number. Suddenly sliding out of mid-air were swords and halberds, no two the same, all of them treasured weapons with dazzling ornaments. And all of them were aimed at Assassin.

I cannot win. Assassin realized it instinctively, without need for thought. *Winning against him is impossible.* It was stupid to even think about facing him. He was able to hit Assassin, a Servant; that golden shadow had to be a Servant too. And if he was stopping an invasion into the Tousaka mansion, then his Master must be Tokiomi—In other words, he must be the Heroic Spirit Archer.

There's no need to fear *that?*

In his pledge to his Master, Assassin knew there were no contradictions in Kirei's words. Before such an overwhelming enemy, fear was—yes, there was no place for fear; there could only be despair and abandon. Slashing through the air with a howl, infinite shining blades rained down on Assassin.

Assassin felt the eyes of familiars observing from outside the place. The first Servant to fall in the fourth War of the Holy Grail met his unsightly end without even a retort, witnessed by the other Masters. At the last moment, Assassin understood the true intention of his Master, Kotomine Kirei, and of the leader, Tousaka Tokiomi.

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Relaxing in a comfortable chair in his room, Tousaka Tokiomi listened to the roar of the countless Noble Phantasms drilling the ground, tearing flesh to pieces.

"Well, things are looking up. Now . . ."

The magus muttered to himself, his profile radiating a different glow from the one under the lamp shade. By its mere presence, the golden figure stood out in the dimly lit surroundings, like the one on the roof that had just executed the invader. Turning into spirit form to come back to Tokiomi's room, then switching back again to physical form, the Servant Archer stood proudly beside his Master, who wore a look of satisfaction.

The figure looking around, clad in golden armor, was tall and dignified. He was a young man with golden hair like a blazing flame, handsome with an elegant face. His eyes, crimson like blood, were visibly not those of a human, and whomsoever he stared at could only wither before their mysterious radiance.

"You made me perform an extremely trifling duty, Tokiomi."

Tokiomi stood up from his chair and bowed respectfully, yet elegantly.

"I am sorry for your trouble, King among kings."

As Master to the summoned Servant, those were manners more humble than necessary. But Tousaka Tokiomi expressed his gratitude without reserve to the Heroic Spirit he had summoned. As one from a valued lineage himself, Tousaka Tokiomi could discern nobility better than anyone else. He was the guest of honor Tokiomi had summoned to win this fourth Heaven's Feel; not a humble servant, but the greatest hero.

This man, Archer in the present era, was the King of Heroes, GILGAMESH, the tyrant who ruled ancient Mesopotamia. Part divinity, part human. As a hero, rooted in the oldest origin of mankind, he counted among the oldest kings. Tokiomi firmly believed in the value of nobility. Even with the supremacy of the Command Seals or with the best contract, nothing could surpass rank. Even if he was a Servant, that golden young man was one who deserved the highest honor.

"The outcome of tonight's event will save us a lot of complications. Having witnessed the power of the King of Heroes, no stray dog will try to bite in vain."

"Mm." Archer appreciated the truth in Tokiomi's words. Tokiomi and his upright attitude, lost in greater flattery than was necessary, also had no hope in this era. The King of Heroes understood that.

"In a little while, the field beasts will understand who the hunting lion really is. Please be patient until then."

"Very well. I will just walk off my boredom. This era seems fairly interesting."

At Archer's words, Tokiomi glossed his slight irritation over with a sour look. Certainly, the Servant he had contracted with was the strongest. But he gave him headaches whenever he wandered away for his selfish curiosity. In the present world, he had not spent a single entire night quietly in the Tousaka mansion. Tokiomi devoted much effort to keeping Archer inside the mansion for Assassin's raid tonight.

"Does this era please you?"

"Its ugliness is beyond salvation, but it holds love as it is. What matters is whether there exists here a treasure worthy of my fortune." Bragging with a cynical smile, Archer gazed at Tokiomi with his red eyes full of divine authority.

"If there is not one thing worthy of my favor in this world, the price for summoning me in vain will be heavy, Tokiomi."

"Rest assured. The Grail will definitely catch your attention, King of Heroes." Confident, Tokiomi replied without fear.

"That will be mine to decide . . . Well, this is fine. For the time being, I will do as you say. Every treasure in this world is mine. Depending on the kind of treasure this Holy Grail is, I will not overlook the other curs who are fighting for it." With that haughty declaration, the King of Heroes turned his heels and canceled his physical form, vanishing like a mist.

"I will be your lion, and I expect to be amused. I will leave the details to you, Tokiomi."

Tokiomi dropped his head at the shadow voice without a shadow. He did not stop his act of reverence until the presence of the Heroic Spirit had disappeared from the room.

". . . Well, well." The magus sighed deeply when the pressure from the golden man ceased.

Servants receive certain skills when they are assigned a class in the present world. These skills are abilities such as Assassin's Presence Concealment, Caster's Territory Creation, Saber's and Rider's Riding. Likewise, a Servant of the Archer class possessed the unique skill of Independent Action. This ability meant he could be severed from the prana-supplying Master and act autonomously; this is useful, for example, if a Master needed to

concentrate all of his prana for a single large spell, or if the Master was injured and unable to supply enough prana. On the other hand, it becomes harder for the Master to have the Servant accompany him and be completely under his control.

As Archer, Gilgamesh's skill of Independent Action was ranked A. With this alone, he could use Noble Phantasms at will in battle and remain in the present world without the Master's backup. But with this, the King of Heroes was also able to ignore Tokiomi's inclinations and stroll around Fuyuki City as he wished. Constantly apart from each other, Tokiomi could never be fully aware of his own Servant's whereabouts, or of what he was doing. Having no interest himself in his own world, Tokiomi could not understand what amusement a man like the King of Heroes could find by walking around, watching the lives of others.

"Anyway, for now, I can let Kirei handle it. Everything is going as planned for the moment."

Snickering, Tokiomi looked down through the window at the garden. The excessive destruction gouged when Assassin crept in made the scene look like it had been bombed.

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"Assassin . . . has been killed?"

Disappointed by how quickly it had ended, Waver Velvet opened his eyes. Just a moment ago, he was spying over the complete reversal that took place in Tousaka's mansion, and his vision now returned to the room he had gotten used to—on the second floor of the old couple's house, in which he lived in like a
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parasite. The image behind his eyelids just a while ago came from the vision of a rat familiar. That kind of magecraft was nothing spectacular for Waver.

With the opening of Heaven's Feel, the first step was obviously for Waver to start by observing the Matou and Tousaka mansions. There was a detached villa owned by the Einsberns in the forest on the outskirts, but the magus from the North had not arrived yet, so there was no reason to observe an empty place. Nothing from either house had moved yet, and the Masters grew tired of waiting, wondering about raiding either the Tousakas or the Matous; that was only wishful thinking to ease the observation, but they did not expect it to actually happen.

"Hey Rider, here's something new. Someone has just lost."

The giant, despite his Master's call, lay there on the floor and only responded with a "Hmf" devoid of motivation, without even turning around.

"..." Waver was downright peeved.

The Servant had been doing nothing but resting his pained muscles in his room—strictly speaking, it was someone else's room—yet Waver could not settle down. Rider had refused an order to return to spirit form when he was not doing anything, claiming he felt more comfortable in materialized form, and had been showing off his gigantic body all this time. Dragging out his materialization meant a large prana drain on the Master supplying his Servant. That was not a problem for Waver, but Rider certainly was being quite unmindful.

Harder to forgive was what Rider was doing with Waver's prana; which was . . . well, nothing. Despite Waver's scorn, he just

rested, relaxed, nonchalantly picking around in a dish and watching a rental video. Can you believe that Servant?

"Hey, did you hear me? Assassin got done in. Heaven's Feel is starting!"

"Hmm."

"... Hey!" As Waver's voice rose with excitation, Rider finally turned around halfway.

"Yeah, what about some assassin guy? A rat in hiding is not much of an enemy."

"..."

"Anyway, boy, what's amazing is that, here."

Rider turned back to face the CRT as he spoke more heatedly. The cassette was playing *An Authentic Account of the World's Flying Force, part 4*. With his mania for military affairs, Rider had gotten his hand on everything related, books and images alike. Of course, providing all of it was Waver's responsibility. Otherwise the giant Servant would walk into a library or video store, which was not fine with the Master.

"There, that big black B2 thing. It's wonderful. I'm thinking about buying ten of those."

"Just buy a country if you have that kind of money!" Waver spat his answer out of frustration, and Rider made a serious face, moaning "Oh yeah ..."

"Of course, funds are an important matter. Maybe I should plunder a city as rich as Persepolis."

Apparently, Rider had seriously considered conquering the world, and done his research on the wars of the current era. Even

the information he had received from the Grail had limits—he did not know the price of a stealth bomber.

"For the most urgent matters, this Clinton man is a formidable enemy. He might be a stronger enemy than King Darius."

"..." Waver had been enduring stomachaches ever since he summoned that Servant. He would have a stomach ulcer by the time they get the Grail. Shutting the giant in front of him out of his consciousness, Waver tried to think positively.

At any rate, it was good that Assassin was the first to fall. Waver was aware that his own Servant, Rider, with his combat abilities, was the type who would go full frontal in a fight. An enemy that planned clever tricks was a bigger threat—Assassin fit that definition. The yet-unknown Caster was also a problem, but an Assassin who could creep up without revealing himself was the most direct menace. The three main Knight classes—Saber, Lancer, Archer, then Berserker, who just riots his way through—are nothing to be afraid of. Rider's abilities and Noble Phantasms were enough to push them back and win. All that was left was to find out Caster's true name.

"—So, how was Assassin killed?" Sitting up cross-legged, Rider surprised Waver with his sudden question.

"... Eh?"

"Yeah, the Servant who beat Assassin. Didn't you see him?"

Waver faltered. He did see him—but, just what did he see?

"Must be that Tousaka Servant ... I guess. Looked strong and aggressive, showing off with a lot of shiny golden things. It took only an instant, so I'm not sure ..."

"That's what mattered, fool." Something exploded between Waver's eyebrows, and he yelled in shock. The unexpected pain and surprise made Waver fall off and tumble flat on his face.

That was Rider's middle finger, held bent by the thumb, then shot forward: a flick on the forehead. No strength was put into it, but Rider's finger was hard as the root of a pine tree. Waver's skin swelled red from the force. Again, the target of violence and abuse. Waver, confused between fear and frenzy, was at a loss for words. This was the second time he had been hit in his entire life, and by his Servant. Unable to inhale from anger, Waver moved his lips like a fish. Ignoring his upset Master, Rider drew a deep sigh.

"You know, if I fight, it's to win and survive. What will happen if you can't observe properly?"

Waver did not reply. Rider was right. He did not want to hear it from a Servant who did nothing but lie down, eat tea cakes, watch videos and read, but it was true that there were enemies who could pose a problem.

"Oh well, never mind. That shiny golden or whatever, what impression did he give you?"

"I, I told you that . . ."

How could he have understood anything in that instant? For a start, the attack that sent Assassin into oblivion was probably a Noble Phantasm. Even through the eyes of the familiar, he had perceived a huge burst of prana. Yet, the number of weapons pouring down on Assassin—

". . . Hey, Rider. Servants usually have just one Noble Phantasm, right?"

"Generally, yes. Sometimes, there are Heroic Spirits who manage to get two or three. I myself am such a case."

That's right, the night he arrived in the present world, Rider showed Waver a Noble Phantasm and said it was not his only trump card.

"Eh, there's no sense in considering the number of Noble Phantasms. As you already know, Noble Phantasms are the crystallization of historical facts and anecdotes that made the Heroic Spirit famous, but they do not have to take the form of weapons; they can also be specific abilities or unique means of attack."

"... So, throwing ten or twenty weapons at once could be a Noble Phantasm in itself?"

"A sword that splits countlessly, eh? That could happen. It has the potential of being a Noble Phantasm, yes."

Still, what defeated Assassin was something different. Waver did see, through the eyes of his familiar, that the launched weapons were not all the same. They were not mere duplications; those were all unique weapons. Could they all have been Noble Phantasms? That should not be possible. There were not one or two, but many more blades flooding the crawling Assassin.

"Oh well, that's fine; we'll know when we figure out the true identity of the enemy."

Laughing heartily, Rider slapped Waver, deep in thought, on the back. The impact shook his spine and the small magus started choking. The blow this time was not humiliating, but Waver could appreciate the gentler touch.

"Are—are you quite done?!"

"Good. My heart is in joy." Rider remarked carelessly with a daring smile. "Food and sex, sleep and war—enjoy yourself however you want. That's the secret to a man's life."

"..."

Waver could not see the fun in that; he had no experience in two of those matters.

"All right, let's look for some fun outside." Cracking his neck muscles, the giant Servant stretched. "We're departing for the front. Be ready."

"The, front ... Where?"

"Over there of course. Where else?"

"That's nuts!"

Standing up and nearly reaching the ceiling, Rider looked down at Waver's angry face and smiled.

"You're not the only one who was observing the Tousaka fort. Assassin's death is already known. They'll all grow tired of looking out for an attack from the shadow, and start moving together at once. We'll find them and hunt them."

"Find and hunt ... Like it'll be that simple."

"I am Rider. I easily dominate the other Servants who are going on foot, you know?"

With that boast, Rider drew the sword at his waist out of its scabbard. Realizing he was about to call out that Noble Phantasm, Waver stopped him confusedly.

"Waitwaitwait! You can't do that here. You'll blow up the house!"

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That night, an expected visitor showed up at Fuyuki Church on the hill in the Shinto suburbs.

"In accordance with the Heaven's Feel agreement, I, Kotomine Kirei, request the protection of the Holy Church."

"I accept. In accordance with my duty as supervisor, I, Kotomine Risei, guarantee your security. Come inside."

To the two men who had arranged everything, this was a laughable farce, but they could not know if there was anyone spying at the gate. Feigning strictness, Kotomine Risei wore a grave face and invited his son, weakened by his defeat, inside the church.

With many residents from outside, Fuyuki had more people coming to the church than the other towns did. Despite being in the far East, this church of Fuyuki was the spiritual center of a belief which originated from western Europe, giving it genuine splendor. However, this resting place of ordinary Christians was nothing more than a camouflage, as the church was built by the Holy Church specifically for Heaven's Feel. Being the third-grandest spiritual place, it matched the mansion of the Tousaka family, who also owned the place.

Obviously, the priest who had come here and taken over the supervision of this struggle to the death between Masters and Servants was a member of the Assembly of the Eighth Sacrament; in other words, the priest who served the ordinary Christians in daily religious service was none other than Kotomine Risei.

"I see everything has been carried out without problem."

Leading Kirei through the parish house, Father Risei dropped his act and nodded with a serious face.

"Father, who is watching the church?"

"Nobody. This neutral ground has guaranteed inviolability. The Church dissuades Masters from interfering unnecessarily. Apart from that, the defeated ones are of no interest."

"We will enjoy tranquility then."

Sitting on the offered chair, Kirei sighed deeply. Then he added, "We shouldn't neglect vigilance, to be sure. There could always be someone out there."

He spoke in a cold-hearted, commanding tone to nobody in particular. Of course, his words were not addressed to his father. Risei, beside him, perceived no strangeness in his son's muttering.

"—Also, was anyone observing the scene?"

"Yes. That would be me."

This time, a voice responded to the untargeted question. A woman. Under cover in the corner of the room, a female appeared in black cloth that seem to boil. Neither Kirei nor Risei raised an eyebrow at her appearance. But she was one who should not have been there. Jet black robe wrapping a soft stature, a symbolic skull mask hiding her face, this costume was without doubt that of the Heroic Spirit of assassination, Hassan-I Sabbāh.

"There were traces of four different types of familiars at the place of Assassin's death. I believe there are at least four Masters who have witnessed the scene."

"Hm. . . . We are missing one."

Narrowing his eyes in thought, Kirei looked at his father.

"The spirit board definitely indicated the arrival of seven Servants, didn't it, Father?"

"Yes, without a doubt. The last one, Caster, arrived two days ago. As usual, the names of the Masters weren't given, but all the Servants of this Grail War should be present."

"I see." Kirei would have preferred all five witnessing the night's farce.

"Observing the mansions of the three main families should be a given for all Masters participating in Heaven's Feel." The skull-masked woman at his side—the one who could not be anyone but Hassan-I Sabbāh—spoke her opinion. "If there was anyone with the nerve to let down their guard like that, they are too careless for us Assassin to bother with anyway. Is this conclusion satisfactory?"

"Mm."

If Kirei had lost his Servant, the seals on his hand should have disappeared. But the three black stigmas were still there—Assassin had not been annihilated. The masked woman serving the two Kotomines must be the real Hassan-I Sabbāh.

"Is his death regrettable?"

The woman shook her head indifferently.

"That man was one of us Hassan without any particular forte. Losing only him does not affect us as a whole. Still—"

"Still . . .?"

"I cannot say his death affects us, but a loss is a loss. You could say it is like losing a finger. I do not wish to think he was sacrificed in vain."

Kirei listened intently as the woman protested with humility. Of course, that was not unreasonable.

"That was not in vain. One can deceive the other Masters by sacrificing a finger. They all believe Assassin to be fallen. Do you not think you can all turn the tide of battle under cover?"

"Indeed, you speak the truth." The woman in black cloth bowed her head deeply.

This time, thinking that Assassin has been removed, nobody would expect the Heroic Spirit of Shadows to creep up behind their back. Who could possibly know that the Servant Assassin was still kneeling in front of the Master who had run to the Church? That was evidently a strange situation, even for those in competition for the miracle called Heaven's Feel.

Indeed the name Hassan-I Sabbāh did not refer to only one person. The name Hassan—meaning "old man of the mountain"—was once the root of the word "assassin," a name passed down to the head of a group of assassins in the Middle East. That meant that, historically, there were several Heroic Spirits with the name Hassan. Naturally, there were female Hassans as well. But as a general rule, there could only be one Assassin summoned for Heaven's Feel. It was theoretically possible to have control over two Servants by taking one from another Master, but having more than two Assassins simultaneously made it obvious that a rule had been flouted.

"At any rate, this marks the opening of the hostilities." The exaggerated voice of the dignified old priest was filled with anticipation of victory. "The Fourth Heaven's Feel has begun. It seems these old bones of mine will witness a miracle this time."

Unable to share his father's enthusiasm, Kirei gazed silently at a dimly lit corner of the priest's house.

Act 3

– 162:26:39

Fuyuki City, Shinto.

The housing district east of Miongawa was a new town reclaimed from a once-empty wasteland. It had a history of its own, different from Miyama town, but a large-scale redevelopment project by the government was underway to refine it by building a modern business district over the ancient site.

The buildings in the business district-to-be were only forty percent complete, but the maintenance of the park and shopping mall in front of the station was done; future plans for the Shinto district to be clean, crystalline, pompous and unindividualistic were already in place. The city hall was also being moved, piece by piece, to Shinto; revived with modern iron, glass and mortar, it would steal all central municipal functions from Miyama. It was crowded even during the holidays. Amidst the crowd going to and fro, cowering from the northern wind, Emiya Kiritsugu disappeared, unseen and unsensed, attracting no attention.

His shirt and coat, aged and worn, and his lack of baggage gave him a slack appearance that belied him as an immigrant. In fact, he had been like that since he walked through the country up to Shinto in Fuyuki, but Japan was still his native country. Used to coming and going, he felt better here.

Feeling overwhelmed, Kiritsugu looked down at the cigarette pack, freshly bought from a vending machine. It had been been nine years since he stopped smoking. Although he could not find his favorite brand in the far land of the Einsberns, he had kicked the habit mainly out of consideration for Irisviel and Ilyasviel. The moment he arrived at Fuyuki station, prepared for battle, he had thrown a coin in the vending machine out of habit.

Armed with a disposable lighter bought from a convenience store to get the momentum going, he opened the cigarette pack. The white of the row of filters was dazzling. He put one in his mouth and lit it. The movements came to him naturally, as though the past ten years had never happened. The aroma flowed into his lungs; he got used to the taste like a seasoned smoker.

Kiritsugu looked at the transformed scenery, completely different from the one he vividly remembered in his heart. He had reconnoitered Fuyuki undercover three years earlier, but Shinto had completely changed since then. Though not unexpected, it was beyond his imagination. He had to verify the surrounding neighborhood again.

Despite the slight difficulty posed by the area's transformation, Kiritsugu reached the hotel he was seeking. The lobby and the front had been straightened up, but inside it was still a cheap business hotel, and good shelter for a wide range of customers.

With great familiarity, Kiritsugu walked across the lobby to the elevator, taking it to the seventh floor. Here, in room 73, was where his faithful subordinate had been staying for the past three days.

In the world of magi, his relation with Hisau Maiya would be that of teacher and student. But to Kiritsugu, who saw magecraft as merely a tool he had acquired some knowledge in—not as the object of his quest—there was never any sense of master-and-pupil. What he taught Maiya was merely a *way* to fight. This, too, was only for the purpose of using her as a tool. This took place at a time when he went through countless desperate battles for an utopia that could never be fulfilled, when he had not known about the existence of the Grail; his connection to Maiya was older than the one with Irisviel. Having fought at his side, Maiya knew the blood-stained side of Kiritsugu that his wife had never seen.

He knocked a pre-arranged rhythm on the door of room 73, and it opened immediately, as though expecting him. Glancing at each other in lieu of unnecessary greetings, Kiritsugu entered the room and closed the door. Maiya had already been involved for quite a while. After Kiritsugu retreated, she arranged the preparations for the Grail War according to his instructions given from overseas, and had been busy returning to the Einsbern castle many times.

Handsome and fair-skinned, she was a beauty who used neither eye-liner nor lipstick. Her long eyes and gaze always seemed to be scrutinizing suspiciously, but she left an impression of deliberate indifference. Her jet black hair, straight like silk,

caught the glance of many men, but her cold, sharp look definitely dashed the hopes of any lady-killer.

They had known each other for over ten years. When they first met, she was only a young girl. Now, no longer a child, she was characterized by a sharpened sagacity instead. That type of beauty tired normal people easily, but with Kiritsugu it was quite the opposite. She was a woman who constantly gauged reality, and could sometimes deliver accurate judgment more mercilessly than Kiritsugu. With her, Kiritsugu did not have to be ashamed of his foul plays or detest his cruelty. This put him somewhat at ease.

"There was movement in the Tousaka mansion last night." Maiya started by jumping straight to the point. "Please watch the recordings. By the way, the equipment has all arrived."

"Understood. First, the situation."

Nodding, Maiya switched the decoder of the television. In addition to the magecraft Kiritsugu had taught her, Maiya was particularly able in the management of regular familiars, and Kiritsugu often entrusted her with scouting or reconnaissance missions. This time again, Kiritsugu has assigned to her the surveillance of the Matou and Tousaka mansions.

Of all the familiars, Maiya prided herself on her bat familiars, but unlike those of other magi, her bats had a miniature CCD camera tied on the abdomen. Of course, this was Kiritsugu's idea. The illusions and camouflage-bounded fields of magi were often based on using mental suggestion on an observer, but defense systems against such methods often neglected to include electronic countermeasures. Video records were helpful for reviewing, so

despite slowing down the familiar, the use of cameras was a viable solution.

The entire scene of the previous night was replayed on the 13-inch CRT. The blurred image was comprehensive enough for one to understand the whole incident. Without raising an eyebrow, Kiritsugu watched the skull-masked Servant's failure to escape annihilation at the hands of the golden Servant. The defeated Servant with the white mask was, without doubt, Assassin.

"What do you make of it?"

"I think it went too well." Maiya replied immediately.

"The time lag between Assassin's materialization and the attack on Tousaka's Servant was too short; he was clearly waiting. Against an opponent like Assassin, who has Presence Concealment . . . I have to wonder if Tousaka was truly unaware of the invasion beforehand."

Kiritsugu nodded. Truly his pupil; Maiya's conclusion matched his.

"The more I think about it, the more it seems like a pre-arrangement. Why did Tousaka expose his Servant like that if there was such a huge gap in ability?"

The Tousaka family had obviously accumulated experience from the second and third Grail fights. There was no way they did not know that the other Masters would be observing the Tousaka mansion.

Heaven's Feel was a confrontation between heroes of great fame. The legend of these heroes held a lot of information on their fighting patterns as well as their strong and weak points. It was natural that the skills and weaknesses of the Heroic Spirits were

known from the beginning. Thus, it became an ironclad rule to hide the true identity of the Heroic Spirits in the war between Servants. In light of this, Heroic Spirits were all referred to by class to avoid revealing their true name.

Last night, Tousaka had left two clues to the other Masters: his Servant's appearance, as well what seemed to be a Noble Phantasm. Neither were sufficient to pin the Servant's identity with certainty, but it was a risk easily avoided nonetheless. If he wanted to bring Assassin down, he could have done so out of plain sight.

"Showing us something so unnecessary—that could only mean he wanted us to see it."

Kiritsugu nodded again at Maiya's conclusion.

"Possibly. If there is any merit in doing that, then the explanation is obvious.Maiya, what happened to Assassin's Master?"

"Kotomine Kirei? He went to the Church last night and requested the supervisor's protection."

Hearing that name, Kiritsugu's eye lit with a cold ghastliness.

"Maiya, send a familiar to the Fuyuki Church. One will be fine for now."

"... Is it all right? The church is an area where aggressions between Masters are prohibited."

"Only if the supervisor finds out. Stay at a reasonable distance. Don't overdo it. He does not need to know."

Maiya frowned at Kiritsugu's incomprehensible instructions. "Should I not observe the Church?"

"You can just make it a regular patrolling. What you must concentrate on is staying absolutely undiscovered."

"Yes, understood."

Maiya could not understand what Kiritsugu had in mind, but she did not question him. At once, she picked one of the three bats observing the Tousaka mansion and willed it by thought to go to Fuyuki Church at the end of Shinto. Kiritsugu switched off the TV and resumed inspecting the equipment Maiya had prepared.

Among the various tools lined up on the bed sheet awaiting Kiritsugu's inspection, there was not a single item a magus would find interesting. There was not a single ritualistic catalyst, such as a dagger, cup, talisman, elixir or spiritual vessel. They were state-of-the-art and highly effective, but otherwise were nothing but conventional weapons; nothing that could store prana.

Such heresy was what earned the magus Emiya Kiritsugu the nickname of "Magus Killer." The weakness of magi was negligence arising from arrogance. They believed in their own mysteries and knowledge; they never questioned the belief that the only threat to them aside from God could be anything other than another magus. In battle, they were sensitive only to signs of magecraft; they were able to detect the use of any trivial skill. Honing their perception of magecraft, and considering their countermeasures decisive—that was a school of thought no magus strayed from. Hence, they ignored any physical attack that was void of magecraft, treating it as a secondary menace. They had no fear of the sharpest knife, the strongest bullet, until the instant they were pierced by one. Before that happened, the strength of magecraft could create illusions, cause paralysis of the enemy, or

raise defensive bounded fields; they could completely negate any vulgar attack. But they despised technology. The extent of things a human could do without relying on magecraft was something few magi were really aware of.

An unexpected attack is a shortcut for any battle. Kiritsugu had reached a conclusion from numerous death battles against magi: They were weak to non-magical attacks. Applying that conclusion to the circumstances of this Heaven's Feel, Maiya had prepared a set of equipment. Among them, the rifle lying on the sheet reeked most of gun oil. It was a work of art, the crystallization of the newest electronic techniques coupled with a ferocious form.

Its base was a Walther WA2000 semi-automatic sniper rifle. A rifle with a total length slightly over 90CM, in a compact size; the bull-pup structure with a gas-operated magazine gave the gun barrel a length of 65CM. The .300 Winchester Magnum shell had an effective range of 1,000M. In the modern world, this was a rifle of the highest class, in the highest performance bracket. The costly price tag of $12,000 for this phantom gun was justified by its status as one of only 154 units that were produced.

Instead of the standard sighting device made by Smith & Bender, Kiritsugu had installed a pair of aligned devices as a special scope mount, above the barrel and on the left flank, both extra-large optic devices fixed in parallel.

The main sight was the latest night vision scope, the best of the US armed forces, an AN/PVS04. The piece of equipment, in essence an ultra-sensitive video camera, was a simple electrical light amplifier with a lens, producing and outputting perfect illumination. It was an electronic "owl eye" that multiplied the

range of vision by 3.6, 600YD under the moonlight or 400YD in starlight. Essentially, it was the latest equipment used by the US armed forces, and banned for export to prevent technology leaks.

Installed alongside the main scope as side support was a Specter IR heat detector scope. This one was also electronically equipped for night vision, although it was not an intensity amplifier; the image displayed, was the heat pattern of the subject instead. It could perceive temperature variations from −5 to 60°C up to 200M with a 1.8× magnification.

Having discovered that the operation of Magic Circuits affected the practitioner's temperature, Kiritsugu studied and trained so much that he was now able to read the magus's Magic Circuits through the thermal output by observing the heat distribution. The distinct difference in heat signature between an ordinary person and a magus allowed him to seize an opportunity right after the release of prana. The joint use of both bulky night vision devices was not just for night-time battle, it was a specifically anti-magus configuration.

Despite the steady progress of miniaturization technology and other non-magical innovations, a night vision device remained roughly the size of a plastic bottle, and was too bulky compared to regular optic devices. On top of the brash, compact design of the gun barrel, the enormous pair of scopes had a clumsy air of unbalance. The total weight of the gun exceeded 10KG. It was a weapon more suited for a support fire squad than for sniping. The main equipment hindered practical use, but it was a challenge Kiritsugu had already optimally calculated. Compared to magecraft, this night-vision sniping gun was certainly lackluster.

Magecraft gave improved vision in the dark, and it could detect the position of an enemy magus. But this gun could take down a target without releasing any prana.

In the dark, unable to detect any prana, and faced with the possibility of being hit from several hundred meters away—this was a situation not unfamiliar to a professional soldier, but it made novices of many magi. A self-conscious magus, having stepped into a world of mysteries beyond human intellect, could not relate to the stereotypes of a narrower world.

Kiritsugu picked up the heavyweight-class super sniper gun from the bed and checked the smoothness of the breech block and the weight of the trigger, making sure it was in top condition.

"There is no correction up to five hundred meters. Do you want to check it?"

"No. It's fine."

He would have liked not only to check the alignment, but also to have a grasp of its shooting characteristics. But with the constitutional government of Japan being as it was, that was unfortunately not easy. The Grail War hostilities had already started; he might have to use the gun this very night. Kiritsugu fully trusted Maiya's preparations.

The other rifle, prepared in addition to the Walther sniping gun, was for Maiya's role as vanguard scout—a Steyr AUG assault gun. Like Kiritsugu's rifle, its night vision scope had also been replaced, but surprisingly its weight remained under 5KG.

Furthermore, a Calico M950 sub-machine gun was readied as a reserve sidearm. Its compact size made it no different from a large handgun in profile, and the reinforced plastic made it look more

like a toy than the Walther sniping gun, but the unique magazine with its helical system allowed for 50 Parabellum rounds, with a firing rate of 700 shots per minute; a brutal armament.

The rest of the arsenal included personal hand grenades, stun grenades, smoke grenades, and C2 plastic explosives. Following instructions Kiritsugu had sent from the North, Maiya prepared the equipment without missing a thing, but Kiritsugu's expressionless eyes did not look satisfied yet.

"And the one I entrusted to you?"

"It is here."

Maiya reverently pulled a rosewood case from the bottom of the closet with both hands, further stiffening her beautiful, unsmiling face. Taking the case, Kiritsugu placed it on the side table, unfastened the clasps and expertly opened the lid.

The armament on the bed was all brand new. The Einsbern family's assets certainly provided the funds and connections necessary to procure brand new, cutting-edge equipment without much difficulty, despite the exorbitant cost. But inside that rosewood case, the handgun that slept in lengthy silence was not something money could buy. This was the weapon Kiritsugu favored on battlefields, the weapon he had entrusted to Maiya when he retired nine years ago; one of a kind, a weapon for Kiritsugu's use only.

High-tech equipment, obtainable with money, formed the main armament of Emiya Kiritsugu the Magus Killer, but there also existed a weapon for Emiya Kiritsugu the Magus—a Mystic Code, a weapon through which a magus could use magecraft in battle.

Thompson Center's Contender. A grip and fore end carved in walnut, with a gun barrel 14IN long, reminiscent of a dagger in its scabbard. The only handgun parts were the trigger and the percussion hammer; the cylinder and slide could not be found on the simple exterior, making it closer in form to a percussion pistol from the last hours of the Middle Ages.

Actually, the Contender was a single shot pistol with a break-open cartridge chamber. This gun was essentially a pistol for target-shooting sport, but Kiritsugu's gun barrel had been switched to meet high-caliber hunting specifications. Furthermore, it had been magically modified for use with magic bullets.

The bullets used were .30-06 Springfield. A cartridge with a bottleneck structure, its size and power level were different from a handgun bullet's. The .30-06 was 10% stronger than the .308 Winchester bullet, surpassing even the hand cannon class of a Magnum bullet. Discharged from a handgun, it would have extreme firepower.

But the true menace of this gun lay not in the destructive power of physical explosives and warheads. Special bullets were installed along with the gun in the case. In the core of the twelve remaining shots were sealed powdered bones from Kiritsugu himself. When Kiritsugu's prana was fired, these magical bullets forced into the target the essence of the magus Kiritsugu. So to speak, one could consider it an imitation of a Conceptual Weapon.

Technology became the blind spot of magi who stuck to magecraft. Ultimately, this was only a tendency, and the converse is not generally true. Indeed, a lot of magi in the world could be

defeated by means of a night vision and a heat sensor scope. Nevertheless, there were exceptions that could not be gauged with rules and experience. Few magi deviated from this defining stereotype; to Kiritsugu, opponents who did were *formidable* enemies. Against these formidable enemies untricked by decoys, enemies whom Kiritsugu, a lone magus, must meet face-to-face when he ran out of alternatives, the Contender became Kiritsugu's most powerful fang.

Rewinding the clock in his heart, Kiritsugu picked the Contender up from the case. In the past, the walnut gun had absorbed the perspiration of Kiritsugu's hand countless times, and even after nine years, it still fit his hand and fingers perfectly. Does the hand grip the handle, or does the handle grip the hand? The distinction was unclear. With just a little strength in his fingers, the gun might fuse with the bones of his hand, and become an extension of his arm.

With a cautious pull on the spool with his index finger, the chamber lock was released, collapsing soundly a short while after. Sliding a bullet from the same case into the opened chamber, he closed the barrel again with a snap of his wrist. Now loaded, its overall weight was 2.6kg. Kiritsugu's right hand responded in familiar fashion. Recalling the old sensation, Kiritsugu's chest hurt as he thought about how he had gotten too used to the touch of a dangerous weapon.

Will his hand remember so perfectly the touch of his wife and daughter at his own end? Their tender cheeks, their slender fingers—how much of that would Kiritsugu remember? Picking

another bullet from the case, he repeated the reloading process that had dyed his hands.

Pulling the rim of the exposed cartridge from the opened chamber with his fingertips, he slid in a second bullet, and immediately slammed the gun barrel shut. It took him two seconds. Distracting thoughts dulled his manipulations.

"I've gotten rusty."

"Yes." Maiya nodded without consideration to Kiritsugu, who was murmuring in self-derision. She knew the old skills of her partner. Kiritsugu pulled the bullet he had loaded in the gun, picked up the other one he had dropped on the floor, and placed everything back in the case with the Contender.

"Ilya's body was even lighter than the Walther here. And she's already eight years old . . ."

Freeing his shameful memories on his own accord, Kiritsugu loosened his tension. But Maiya had barged in behind his back, stopping his train of thought. Agile like a snake, her hand swung around Kiritsugu's neck, seizing the back of his head, blocking his movements, and his mouth—she took his soft, dried lips. The sudden taste and touch of a woman who was not in his heart—she was only breaking off the man's homesickness, but it was unforgivingly quick and sudden.

"Please focus only on what is necessary for now. Don't think of needless things." In a voice muffled by her distracting tongue, Maiya quietly commanded Kiritsugu.

Without a word, Kiritsugu felt the sensation in his chest fade. Cooling off in his heart, the pain vanished in a mist. She was that kind of woman; a woman, once a girl found on a battlefield, whom

Kiritsugu himself had raised. A support machine whose actions were even more machine-like than the mechanical Emiya Kiritsugu. This was Hisau Maiya, the greatest, most indispensable weapon Kiritsugu needed to win this battle.

– 162:27:03

While Emiya Kiritsugu and Hisau Maiya were getting cozy in a cheap hotel in Shinto, the Volare Italia charter from Germany was landing on the F lane of the airport beside Fuyuki City.

Though both were experiencing the frozen wind of winter, the intensity of Japan's winter could not be compared to that of the land where the Einsbern castle lay. Looking up at the soft sunlight of the early afternoon, Irisviel von Einsbern felt her heart lighten.

"So this is the country Kiritsugu was born in."

It was a good place. Although one could get to know a place through pictures and such, Irisviel felt refreshed feeling the air in person. Her heart was not the only thing lightened. On this trip to Japan as a passenger, she could not bring her dresses from the castle; to get to know the town, she had to bring common clothing as much as possible. In short heeled boots and a knee-long skirt, her movements felt reborn.

Nonetheless, being an Einsbern who had lived a secluded life oblivious to the common sense of the outside world, her sense of fashion was uncommon enough. Her silk blouse, knee-high long boots, and casual coat with silver fox fur; everything seemed to come straight from a high class fashion display window. She was very visibly a rare gem, from a particular birthplace, with a particular fashion. Those were clothes clearly fit for a fashion model, but to Irisviel who had grown up alongside polished jewelry, it seemed intimate enough. Irisviel even considered it camouflage in town areas, but it was simply impossible for a

beauty like her to disappear into the general public in the first place.

"So, Saber? What did you think of the plane ride?" One step ahead on the runway, Irisviel asked the Servant of short stature, who was leaving the extended section.

"No comment in particular. It was more wearisome than expected." There was no lie in her words. Her azure eyes were perfectly serene.

"Oh, that's too bad. I thought you would be more surprised and interested."

"... Irisviel, you must think me a primitive person."

To the frowning Saber, Irisviel replied with a bright laugh, void of any ill intention.

"Flying in the sky is no surprise for a Heroic Spirit?"

"Not exactly. But as a Servant summoned in the present world, I have received information about this era. Also, as Saber, I possess the skill of Riding. At this moment, I might even be able to ride this airplane."

Hearing that, Irisviel's eyes rounded with astonishment.

"You could ... pilot it?"

"Probably. My riding skill applies to all vehicles. If I can sit on a saddle or seize a bridle, I can manage the rest by instinct."

Irisviel burst into laughter from Saber's expression. She had not even seen the cockpit. What would she think when seeing one filled with gauges instead of a saddle and bridle?

Saber was correct about her skills, though. The mounting ability of the Saber class allowed the use of any vehicle, save for

phantasmal beasts and divine beasts. If needed, she could definitely handle modern vehicles, such as a car or bike.

"I'm still a little disappointed. You must be the first Servant ever to travel in a plane with a flesh-and-blood body."

"I must apologize about that. I am not a good point of reference."

"Oh, it's fine, don't worry. That isn't what I meant."

Foreign Masters had to travel to Japan by one way or another, but Irisviel and her Servant posing together as a party of two must be an exception. The cause of this lay with Saber. Despite being a Heroic Spirit, she had limits other Servants did not have. The gravest among these was that she could not dematerialize; she did not have the ability to cancel her physical form to move at high speed or cut down the prana consumption from her Master when at rest, something all Servants should be able to do. It was not that there had been a mistake in Kiritsugu's contract or his summoning: the soul of the hero Arturia apparently functioned differently from other Heroic Spirits, for reasons unknown even to Irisviel.

The most problematic burden was that she was unable to turn invisible and hide her existence from other people. There was no way she could walk around in her armored suit, so Saber had to dress up as a human, costumed in modern fashion, and accompany Irisviel. But Irisviel found it rather welcome that Saber would follow her in convenient garments.

"I am glad to travel with you, Saber. I never tire of looking at you."

"Irisviel, why the change?"

"No, It's nothing. Don't mind that."

Hiding a smile, Irisviel turned her head away. Saber found the reaction suspicious.

"When you laugh like that, you're holding something back. Tell me frankly what it is."

"It is not a problem if you always remain in physical form, really. That way, I get to have fun choosing your clothes."

How carefree—Saber wanted to reply, but sighed instead. Being unable to dematerialize was a drawback the Master could not deal with. Enjoying oneself was not the primary objective, but telling the Master it was no laughing matter would be mistaking the cause for the end.

"Irisviel, are these clothes fit for moving around in town?"

"Yes . . . I guess. It is my first time in this country as well, so I am a little anxious."

A third party with common Japanese sensibility would be able to tell that Irisviel was different. Irisviel had taken Saber's measurements prior to their departure and issued an order for modern clothing to a tailor at the Frankfurt airport: a dark blue dress shirt and necktie, with a dark continental French suit. That would be perfect for disguising her as a man. It may sound wild and foolish to dress a young woman under 155CM in height in such fashion, but it was a different matter when it came to Saber. This was not perverse interest in dressing a beautiful woman as a man. Saber's cold and hard face gave an air starkly different from feminine complexion. Disguised as a beautiful young man, she would have no equal. Paired with her thin stature, her face—

obviously glamorous and fair-skinned—could pass her as a manly, charming young man.

"I chose the clothes to balance my appearance. Do you not like them?"

"Ah, not at all. This costume allows me to move freely, and I am used to posing as a man."

The necessity of slipping out of her armored clothing was obvious, but there was no denying that Irisviel had gotten deeper into this dressing-up play than was necessary.

Entrusting to the two accompanying maids the luggage coming out from the cargo area, Irisviel and Saber turned to the customs house with empty hands. After the two maids had sent the luggage to the Einsbern villa in the forest on the outskirts by a different route, they arranged their return home. They were not to remain at Irisviel's side for this Heaven's Feel; there was no need to endanger people who were not related. On that matter, Irisviel would take care of her personal belongings by herself, and Saber, ever strong of heart, would remain by her side.

Completing without delay the necessary procedures to enter the country, it did not take much time before they were allowed to get to the airport lobby. On their way there, every single official they passed was astounded by the pair, unable to avert their eyes as they passed. This made the two uneasy.

"Is there something wrong with my clothes?" Sensing the attention of the people coming and going in the lobby, Saber muttered awkwardly.

"Well, it might be too elegant . . ."

Irisviel could only smile bitterly, but she too was the center of attention. At any rate, the two of them were unequaled beauties. Their eccentric clothing, a grand departure from the common sense of the place, balanced their matching act well. They garnered much attention from their surroundings; not just odd glances, but envious ones as well.

"Let's go, Saber. Worrying won't change anything." With that, Irisviel pulled Saber's hand with a bitter face. "At last, we are in Japan. We must enjoy ourselves as much as possible before the battle begins."

"No, Irisviel, the issue is not one of enjoyment—"

As Saber's mumbling trailed off, Irisviel sprang to find a taxi. Saber had not noticed her liveliness until that moment.

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Soon after the two arrived in Fuyuki City, sunset colored the western sky of the late afternoon.

"How lively." The hired car drove down the park plaza in front of the station. Irisviel's eyes lit expressively as she took in the sights of the evening traffic jam. But Saber was studying the surroundings, like a commander reading the topography of a battlefield.

"Kiritsugu has already arrived, hasn't he?"

"Yes. He arranged to reach half a day before us."

Already inside the country, Kiritsugu was to hide his existence and follow a different route from Irisviel's group. He would take a

passenger flight to the international airport at Shin-Osaka and switch to the railroad headed to Fuyuki City.

"Will we meet up again?"

"It's all right. He will be the one to come to us."

Her face betrayed nothing, but Saber was quite shocked by Kiritsugu and Irisviel's plans, which she found unsatisfactory.

"In that case, what is the plan now?"

"Right ... For now, we shall observe the changes in the situation and adapt ourselves accordingly."

"Do you mean we have nothing to do?"

"Exactly."

Irisviel gave an impish smile that looked mischievous to the discouraged Saber.

"Such a waste, after we finally arrived in this distant country."

Smiling while watching the traffic jam around her, Irisviel strolled, a little dispirited. Saber, at her side and feeling confused, firmly followed her pace.

"And—what about trying to find an enemy Servant?"

"Hmm. No way." Refusing blankly, Irisviel turned around, staring expectantly at her partner. "Say, Saber. Since we have such an opportunity, we could look around the town. It must be interesting."

For an instant, Saber was taken aback by the unexpected proposition, but immediately straightened up with a stern face.

"Irisviel. We cannot be unprepared. We have to consider the land of Fuyuki we are walking in as enemy territory already. Heaven's Feel has already started."

"Yes. I depend on you for that, Saber. You will know if we are near a Servant, right?"

"Well . . . That is correct."

Dematerialized or not, Servants could perceive the presence of other Servants. Of course, each Servant has his or her own affinity with this searching ability, and some, like Assassin, have the ability to erase their presence.

"As Saber, I am able to perceive a presence in a radius of up to roughly two hundred meters. But an opponent with the right ability could tamper with that."

"I see. But right here and right now, there is no Servant targeting us, is there?"

"Indeed. But—"

"Then let's have a look around. We don't have to search."

To seek a hidden opponent, striding across town provocatively was certainly an acceptable plan, albeit an audacious one. Since Saber had no active searching ability, there was no other way to carry out a search. Being unable to dematerialize, she also did not have the choice of covert espionage. But Saber sensed that Irisviel, rather than acting on a coherent plan, had a hidden motive. Actually, Saber could not see Irisviel's invitation as anything more than a sightseeing jaunt.

"Irisviel, we should regroup somewhere and reunite with Kiritsugu to work out a plan. Hasn't the Einsbern family prepared a castle on the outskirts of the town?"

"Well . . . Yes, we have that." Now Irisviel started mumbling. Her behavior was inappropriate for a crisis and she knew it. Guessing her intentions, Saber asked again.

"Why do you insist so much on visiting this town?"

"You know . . . This is my first time." Irisviel looked down nervously. Saber gasped in shock.

"—In submitting to the Grail, I gained some knowledge of this world. I know about this land that will become a battlefield. Irisviel, this town isn't really a place for sight-seeing, especially since there are no particularly famous places."

"No, that's not it. That is not what I—" Like a child adamantly refusing to give any explanation at first, Irisviel hesitated a little, finally confessing frankly.

"I—this is the first time I have been outside."

". . . Huh?"

Not understanding initially, Saber listened, dumbfounded.

"Like I said, this is like a rebirth—it is the first time I have stepped foot in the outside world."

"You have stayed in that castle all your life since birth?"

Not liking the conclusion, Irisviel hung her head in shame, giving a small nod.

"I am a puppet created only for this Heaven's Feel. The elder has always told me I had no need to go out."

Saber had not lived a joyful life as Arturia either. But she could not avoid feeling a sense of compassion toward this person who, like a caged bird, had been imprisoned in that frozen castle since birth.

"Of course, it's not like I'm completely ignorant about things, especially after Kiritsugu came. He told me a lot about the scenery and happenings of the outside world, through movies or pictures.

About New York, Paris, and all the people in the world. About Japan too, of course."

Smiling miserably, Irisviel looked at the traffic jam around.

"But . . . this is the first time I have seen this world with my own eyes. Perhaps I am being a little too happy and merry. I'm sorry."

Saber nodded, quietly turning her eyes, and gently offered her arm wrapped in her dark suit to Irisviel.

". . . Saber?"

"This is my first time in this town, but escort is the duty of a knight. So I will do my best. Then, if you please."

"—Thank you." Her eyes lit with a bright joy, Irisviel entwined her arm around Saber's elbow. There was still much time left to nightfall.

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Saber and Irisviel easily drew all the attention in the middle of the business district. The young woman was full of dignity, her glittering silver hair and cashmere coat by no means pompous but definitely fitting, and holding her arm was a good-looking young man with a brilliant face. That was not a combination one would see outside of a cocktail party filled with movie stars. The two silver-screen visions leisurely strode down the road in the Japanese provincial city. Anyone walking down the same road would stop to look, forgetting for an instant to keep walking.

The two did not have the harmony of a couple at a date, nor the admiring eyes of sightseeing tourists; they only followed the

flow of their journey, walking aimlessly. Sometimes they would stop suddenly, gazing gaily at the setting sun shining in the windows of buildings and showroom windows; nothing extraordinary. They did not enter any shops to make any expense nor did they sit at any cafe terrace to rest. Like two understanding outsiders, they simply slipped into the noisy surroundings, watching the working life of the city from a fixed distance.

Unnoticed, the winter sun had sank completely behind the mountain range, leaving the curtain of night which revealed a different face of the urban landscape. Irisviel sighed, entranced by the rainbowed illumination of the twinkling scenery. The world was probably full of towns more beautiful at night than Fuyuki City was, but Irisviel was nonetheless deeply moved by the night before her eyes, as though touching a treasure for the first time.

"It's really beautiful. The life of people alone makes the night dazzling."

Irisviel's murmur was somewhat emotional, and Saber silently nodded in response. The political world she once lived in was a distant space-time apart from this place, yet no emotion sprang from this scene she was seeing for the first time. The tranquility was surface-deep; her nerves were like needles. The place was already enemy territory—that knowledge remained unchanged.

Saber was definitely not a Servant who excelled at searching for the enemy; depending on the situation, an enemy Servant would likely find her first if she was wandering about. It was hard to think that any enemy would pounce straightforwardly while everyone was looking, but a well-timed surprise attack at that point would not be out of the question. Even so, she complied with

Irisviel's wish to fully enjoy herself freely for a brief time without any reproach; she had that much confidence in her sword.

She was the Heroic Spirit summoned in the strongest class—the Saber class. No Servant could surpass her in close combat. She was certain she could clear an escape route from the battlefield under any disadvantage. Actually, a surprise attack would be desirable. She would withstand it fair and square, turn the tables and go in for the kill. If anyone was enough of a fool to make her their enemy, she might remind them that the Saber class was not only about gallantry.

"Hey, Saber, do you want to see the beach next?" Irisviel could not hide her excitement, and the disguised young woman nodded with a smile. Tension would pick up no opponents. She had sworn to protect Irisviel, and she would carry it through to the end while Irisviel enjoyed herself. That was the strength of her enormous pride as a knight.

There was a vast seaside park on the opposite shore of the big bridge crossing the Miongawa. Late at night, two people strolled on the lone walkway with nobody in sight. The north wind from the sea blew softly, uninterrupted, dancing with Irisviel's long silver hair like the trail of a shooting star. Dating couples hated the chill of winter nights here and only came in summer, but Irisviel, seeing the sea for the first time, did not care about the cold; she had grown accustomed to it back at home.

"We should have come here when it wasn't dark." Watching the sea at night fill the bleak darkness, Saber said so in an

apologetic tone. But Irisviel, unconcerned, concentrated on the horizon that had sunk in the dark.

"It's fine. The sea at night is beautiful too, mirroring the night sky like this."

Listening to the endless roar of the waves, a smile crept over Irisviel's face. She had greatly enjoyed the day's walk; her fair-skinned cheeks were flushed. With her innocent and naïve smile, she looked more like a young woman of tender years than a married woman with a child.

"I had no idea . . . that walking through an unknown town with a gentleman would be such an enjoyable experience."

"Was my imitation of a gentleman satisfactory?" Saber chaffed her mockingly; a departure from her usual stubborn Heroic Spirit self.

"It was faultless. Saber, you were a superb knight today."

"You honor me, Princess."

The young woman in the dark suit bowed courteously. Irisviel, a little embarrassed, turned her head toward the sea.

"Saber, do you like the sea?"

"In my time, my country . . . What lay beyond the sea was always the enemy. It was annoying and not very attractive."

"I see . . ."

At Saber's reply, Irisviel's expression clouded a little.

". . . So unforgivable. You are a woman too, but dating gentlemen was an inappropriate thing to enjoy for King Arthur."

"Well. Yes, it was." Saber shrugged her shoulders, smiling nonchalantly. She had no regrets casting her womanhood aside.

Instead, her small chest was filled with the pride of leading on the battlefield.

"But you, Irisviel, would you not want to walk through the city with Kiritsugu rather than with me?"

This time, it was Irisviel's face that was crossed by a smile.

"He . . . cannot do that. He would be pained by mixed feelings."

Not grasping the meaning of her reply, Saber made a dubious face.

"Can't Kiritsugu enjoy his time with you?"

"Not that. He would certainly enjoy it as much as I do . . . That is why he cannot. For him, happiness is a pain."

Carefully analyzing these words, Saber tried to comprehend the contradiction of the man Emiya Kiritsugu.

"—He is a man who cannot value his happiness; Is that the weakness he bears?"

"Maybe. He is always punishing himself deep inside. If he is to keep chasing his dream, he has to be cold-hearted."

Irisviel gazed distantly at the sea, thinking of her husband hiding somewhere in the city, preparing for the same goal.

Saber reflected for a moment upon those words. The day's discussion had moved from sea-gazing to an unexpected topic, even though they had intended to end the day on a pleasant note. Nonchalantly, she held and pulled Irisviel's upper arm. Her attention drawn by the gesture, Irisviel settled down and exchanged a look with Saber.

"An enemy Servant?"

"Yes."

The sensation did not change. From under cover, a hundred meters to the side, he was leaving clear signals provocatively. Clearly conscious of Saber's presence, he did not shorten the distance, slowly distancing himself instead—

"He seems to be inviting us."

"Such honesty. Does he want to choose the battlefield?"

Without any trace of tension in her voice, Irisviel replied with cool calm. In such a battle situation, that was proof of her complete faith in Saber. Saber's inner judgment, revised, started to favor her mistress.

"It appears the opponent has the same expectations we do. Making the opponent bite on their trail ... He is a Servant looking for a frontal fight, just like you, Saber, isn't he?"

"The Lancer or Rider class; a straightforward opponent."

At Saber's nodding, Irisviel again returned a fearless smile.

"Then, shall we take on the invitation?"

"I wish the same."

It was dangerous to blindly take the bait and follow the enemy to a field at his advantage, but Saber was not so frail as to fear such tricks, and her mistress did not underestimate her Servant either. As the presence of the enemy grew more distant, Saber started walking with a quiet self-confidence. Irisviel, following likewise, switched on a palm-sized device hidden in her pocket. This was a transmitter given by Kiritsugu, a device for him to track the position of Irisviel's group from a different route. It was a mechanized gadget, intentionally chosen by Kiritsugu, that worked without using prana.

Irisviel trusted Saber's power. An enemy of lower rank than Saber would be killed in a blink with one sword strike from her proud Servant—she expected an easy development. As far as possible, she wanted her knight to end the fight before Kiritsugu entered the battle.

– 154:15:41

The broad majestic bridge that straddled the widening Mion river spanned over 665m and exceeded three roads in width. The top of the arch was over 50m high. Anyone who stood so high up and faced the full force of the sea gale would miss a step and fall to his end in the river below. Atop that cold steel frame, Waver Velvet had nothing like a lifeline; he clung on tightly with both arms and legs. Naturally, this required giving up the dignity and composure he usually had. Right next to him, his Servant Rider sat cross-legged with odious dignity.

"Ri-de-r, quick ... Let's go down ... Now!" His teeth chattering from the cold and terror, Waver's complaining voice was like the blowing wind to the giant Servant.

"This place is perfect for a look-out. It isn't the time for fancy sight-seeing in a high place."

Sipping from the wine bottle in his hand from time to time, he rambled while looking down at the west bank of the bridge, toward the wide seaside park hidden from the estuary. Waver could not see them, but what Rider was looking at were marks that a Servant had been leaving around for the past four hours. Rider had wandered the streets looking for contact with an enemy, but he only noticed that Servant late in the afternoon. While pondering the option of jumping him, Rider kept observing the Servant from a distance, without advancing. When Waver asked about it, Rider answered with a snort.

"He's clearly luring us out. For him to not pick up on us is strange indeed. I'm not the only one either; other Servants must be studying this behavior as well. An impatient Master would just get tired of waiting at some point, or something. That's what we should be looking forward to."

Rider's plan had no opening as far as Waver could tell; it was unexpectedly perfect. This broad-minded giant Servant could set up sly tactics too. Indeed, as Rider said, only a helpless fool would take the bait and accept the challenge. Those who fell for it would be feeding on each other, decreasing the count. However confident a provocative Servant was, anyone other than Rider seeking a brawl would be quickly dispatched. No matter who was defeated, Rider could easily smash the winner. There was definitely profit to be gained from the fights of others.

Once decided, it became a matter of endurance. Remaining at a fixed distance from the Servant wandering aimlessly in the city, Waver and Rider followed, still surveying. There were obvious reasons for taking a high vantage point, but there were limits as well. Being no Servant himself, Waver with his flesh-and-blood body would definitely die if he fell. This was not something to be ignored, so why did the giant care so little about Waver's safety?

"Co-come down! No, get the hell down! I-I've-I've had it!"

"Ah, just wait. You're such a restless guy. Sitting and waiting is also part of the battle." Sipping from his wine bottle, Rider did not even look at Waver's half-crying face as he answered gratuitously. *"High places are dangerous"*—such common understanding had not yet been established between the two.

"If you're bored, read the book I entrusted to you. It's a good book."

At that, Waver remembered the stupid weight in the knapsack hanging on his shoulder. In such a situation, where even one unnecessary gram of weight could not be afforded, the poetry anthology with its thick hard cover was dead weight. That was the book Rider looted from the library when he arrived in the present world. The *Iliad*, written by the poet Homer of ancient Greece—the epic poem describing the Trojan war, in which gods and humans fought against and alongside each other.

The atlas' purpose was understandable. From his exaggerations of world conquest, it was clear that Rider took great interest in the geography of the modern world, even if such a notion sounded foolish. But what of the poetry anthology? Rider had set up a library at home even though he was preparing for war, yet he still insisted on bringing the *Iliad* with him. Naturally, if he wanted to bring anything that was not part of his regular equipment, he would need to remain materialized; if he was to dematerialize and stay hidden from other people, then Waver would have to carry that luggage. Rider insisted that the book was "preparation for war," but how on Earth could a book that had nothing to do with war strategy be helpful on the battlefield?

"Rider . . . Why did you bring this book?"

At Waver's bitter question, the Heroic Spirit answered with a grave expression.

"The *Iliad* is very profound. At the height of battle, I suddenly get the urge to read a verse of poetry. At a time like that, it irks me when I can't reread something immediately."

The answer sounded like utter nonsense, but fear stopped him from arguing back.

"At a time like that, you mean . . . in battle?"

"Yes." Rider nodded nonchalantly, as though the reply was perfectly normal.

". . . But how?"

"With my left hand of course, while I hold my sword in my right. If I need to hold the bridle with my left hand, I get a page to read it aloud."

Waver was at loss for words.

"It's not that surprising. The warriors of my era all lived a life of battle. Battling while drinking and eating, embracing women while battling, battling even while sleeping. Any one of them could do that."

Ask him anything and he would not stop talking. He did seem capable of doing all that, but . . .

"You're kidding, right?"

"Of course. You fool." He sniggered and delivered another exploding flinch to Waver's forehead.

"Gyaa—h!"

He did not have the time to worry, let alone dodge. At any rate, Waver was clinging with all his might to the steel frame, arms and legs all occupied. He could not even rub his pained forehead, so he did the only thing he could—howl with an unbecoming shriek.

"Hey, kid, anyone would laugh at a joke like that. If you're turning blue from that, it's because you have no guts."

Ignoring Rider's frank laugh, the magus strongly regretted his choice of Heroic Spirit as he shed tears from the pain on his forehead.

"I wanna go back . . . go back to England . . ."

"I told you not to be in such a hurry. Look here, things are moving at last."

". . . Eh?"

Rider pointed at the seaside park with a stern chin.

"Even I, the King of Conquerors, had only just noticed, but yes, it seems there was one more Servant in this park. This guy is not hiding anything either. On the contrary, he's nearing the one who arrived after us."

"Then, then—"

"The two seem to be heading for the port. That's a provocation. That's it. We'll study their fight."

His eyes started to take on the sharp gleam of a beast as he gave a threatening laugh. Though only a spectator, the soul of the Heroic Spirit Alexander was already on the battlefield. In Waver's heart—his body still unable to move on the steel frame—his misery was overriding the sense of reliability he should have felt from Rider. Moreover, he was occupied by the thought that nothing mattered if he fell down anyway.

The west bank of the seaside park was extended by a row of storehouses. The block, which contained harbor facilities, also separated the eastern industrial area from Shinto. With the arrival of night, the pedestrian traffic ceased, and the street lights shone uselessly on the asphalt, further emptying the scenery. Unmanned derrick cranes were turned toward the dark sea, like an

eerie flock of huge fossilized dinosaurs. Indeed, this was a suitable place for Servants to confront each other, hidden from the public view.

Large vehicles drove on the four-lane road by day, but Saber and Irisviel now walked in their place, bearing all the magnificence of duelists heading to a rendezvous. The enemy presented himself in similar fashion without running or hiding. The tall shadow posing in the middle of the empty street emitted an extraordinary amount of prana that flaunted his superhuman prowess more outrageously than his odd outfit did. The two Servants stopped, facing each other about ten meters apart.

Finally, they had met the first Servant. Saber carefully observed the enemy she would be battling to the death with. He was a handsome man, with quirky long hair crudely combed backward. At first glance, he was pretty charming to the eyes. His main pole, over two meters and taller than himself, was obviously his weapon. He belonged to one of the three knight classes—Saber, Archer, and the Heroic Spirit of the Lance; He was without a doubt the Servant Lancer.

Strangely, the long spear was not the only one he had. Apart from the spear Lancer was holding loosely in his right hand, its head resting on his shoulder, he also carried in his left hand a shorter spear that was a third the length of the longer one. To handle a spear with ease, the obvious stance to adopt was of course to hold one with both hands. No matter what one could do with swords, holding two spears was simply not commonplace. The two spears were tightly wrapped from handle to tip with a cloth that looked like an amulet, hiding the shaft. This was probably a

countermeasure to avoid revealing the true name of the Noble Phantasm.

"How nice of you to come. All those who were parading around today in the town have only cowered away. You are the only one valorous enough to answer my invitation." With a humble, cheerful voice, the Heroic Spirit Lancer praised Saber carelessly, without standing on guard.

"Such a pure fighting spirit ; am I correct in thinking you are Saber?"

"Yes, you are. Surely you must be Lancer?"

"Indeed. An exchange of names in a deadly fight is unusual indeed—an unobliged pleasure."

Saber loosened her feigned impudence slightly. "Certainly. Our battle is not one for honor. You too raise your spear for your Master in this era, do you not?"

"Correct." With a strange expression, Lancer answered in a cool, bitter tone, quite unlike someone who wished a deadly exchange. On closer inspection, he was a remarkably handsome and beautiful man. His intrepid features—a high nose bridge and a valiant eyebrow. Despite the stoic air his hard-cut mouth presented, his eyes seemed to hide a quiet grief; a strong, manly scent emanated from him. Below his left eye, he had a beauty spot like a teardrop. It gave his gaze an even more impressive brilliance.

Truly, his features could sweep a lady's heart at a glance—No, did his elegant air of beauty come only from his features? Still behind Saber, Irisviel shortened her breathing a little as she frowned.

"A charm magecraft. It is impolite to use that on a married woman, dear spearman."

Lancer was clearly emitting spiritual power that could marvel women. As a homunculus, Irisviel's body was specialized in the usage of magecraft and her magic resistance was higher than normal, but any ordinary woman would have been enslaved by this man at a glance.

Lancer shrugged with a bitter smile at Irisviel's remark.

"Sorry. It's a curse I was born with. This is all you will get. Blame my birth, or your womanhood."

An example of a charm curse would be Mystic Eyes, but the only one Lancer had been looking at from the start was Saber; he had not even glanced at Irisviel behind her. The charm was probably activated as soon as Irisviel looked at his face. That would make it a Mystic Face instead of a Mystic Eye. Chuckling, Saber observed Lancer.

"You were not expecting my sword to grow dull with that fine look, were you, spearman?"

"That would be a kill-joy, but indeed, the anti-magic ability of the Saber class is no rumor. Excellent. It would not suit my reputation to murder a woman weakened merely by my face. I am glad my first opponent has such backbone."

"Hoh, you were wishing for a fair fight? It is my honor to face such a proud Heroic Spirit."

Exaggerating, Saber replied with a quiet smile; a smile possessed only by those who wished for a straightforward life-or-death duel.

"Then, anytime you please." Picking up the long spear on his right shoulder with a spin, Lancer raised the tip of the short spear with his left hand. His stance—both spears spread like wings—really was an unreadable style.

Saber's fighting spirit boiled as well, and exploded. A surge of prana enveloped the girl's slender dark suit in a tornado-like swirl, and her body was instantly wrapped in silver and azure armor. The armor and gauntlets created by magic were the true form of the beautiful King of Knights, as a Heroic Spirit.

"Saber . . ."

Swallowing nervously, Irisviel called from behind. She could feel the fighting spirit released by both Servants, as well as the atmosphere strained by that tension. There was no room for disruption in this battle. But she could not just stand and watch, even if she was only a substitute Master.

"Take care. I can only support you with healing magecraft, but no more."

Without a word, Saber nodded.

"Leave Lancer to me. But it worries me that the enemy Master is nowhere to be seen."

Lancer's Master, choosing to stay hidden, posed a danger. Usually, a Master would stand by the Servant, instructing him as the battle developed, and providing magical support. As long as Lancer's Master did not have complete faith in him, he had to be lurking nearby, watching over Lancer's battle.

"He might be preparing an odd trick. Please be cautious. Irisviel, I trust you to watch my back."

Her jade eyes spoke calmly and fearlessly. *Trust the Heroic Spirit of the Sword. As one whom this Heroic Spirit recognized as her master, trust yourself likewise, Irisviel*—Saber's eyes spoke silently.

"Understood. Saber, bring me victory."

"Yes. I will."

Nodding resolutely, Saber took a step forward, nearer the range of the long spear, where Lancer was standing on guard.

– 154:09:25

Upon receiving Irisviel's signal, Emiya Kiritsugu and Hisau Maiya raced in the direction of the factories. They were welcomed by a stretch of silence. There was only the howling of the sea wind in their ears, and an atmosphere as quiet and stagnant as death. The night was so serene. However—

"It has already begun."

By the traces of surrounding prana alone, Kiritsugu was able to accurately judge the situation. Someone had formed a barrier; likely the work of the enemy Master. The goal was to segregate ordinary humans from Heaven's Feel, concealing the true battlefield of the war. It was a compulsory rule to prevent magi activities being exposed to other mortals.

Kiritsugu began to think as he cradled over ten kilograms of heavy sniper rifle in his arms. He had already estimated Irisviel's position from the transmitter's. However, the question of how to approach the location remained, and he had little idea where to observe once they reached it.

He had no thought of joining the battle at all. He would inspect the battle at a suitable place, attacking with the rifle only when necessary. Servants were not humans; only a Servant could wound another Servant. No matter how powerful their firearms were, they would not work on Servants. It was Saber's job to battle the opposing Servant. As long as the enemy devoted himself to the battle and did not pay attention to his Master, it was possible to win this fight.

"Up there; that looks like a good place to observe the fight." Maiya pointed in front of them, at a derrick crane towering into the night. The control cabin hovered about thirty meters above the ground. It would be the most optimal observation point around if one managed to climb up there silently. Kiritsugu had no objections to Maiya's suggestion, but he shook his head.

"Yes, that is the ideal place to survey the battle. Someone else is probably thinking the same thing." Maiya understood his intentions without another word.

"Slip in through the eastern bank. I'll go through the west. Find an observation point that overlooks both Saber's battle and the crane."

"I understand."

Maiya disappeared into the shadows of the factories with a jog, holding the AUG assault gun in her hands. Kiritsugu checked the the transmitter as he cautiously moved in the opposite direction.

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All Irisviel could do was to stare in astonishment. The battle was unfolding with extraordinary intensity. She had known it would be a merciless duel that could only take place in such a remote era. Warriors clad in armor, engaging in melee combat with all their strength, amid reflections of light off sword and spear, and the moving shadows of swinging blades.

But the amount of escaping prana and the intense heat was vastly different. If it was merely a clash of cold steel, what was that mighty torrent of air that accompanied it, threatening to destroy

all within sight? The foot that landed crushed the ground. The wind that followed the swinging of weapons crudely severed the lamp post in half. Irisviel could no longer see the movements, executed at such high speeds. She was only feeling the aftershock of the conflict between the two.

The wind ripped the peeling sheet iron on the outer walls of the warehouses like a piece of coiled tin foil. She could not fathom how iron could have been torn away so easily. Perhaps Saber's sword or Lancer's spear had brushed against its adjacent hollow space; she could not come up with any other explanation.

The wind was howling. Faced with a dimension completely at odds with nature's physical laws, the air wailed in paranoia. A chaotic storm raged on the empty street, destroying and trampling all things within. Mere hand-to-hand combat between the two was enough to ruin the entire street.

This is Heaven's Feel—At this moment, Irisviel was experiencing an awe and wonder told only in stories. The world where myths and legends dwelled came alive vividly before her eyes. This could be the rebirth of those legends. Shafts of thunder tore the sky apart and knolls of roaring waves shattered the earth. The imaginary realm was miraculously materialized with astonishing clarity. This is . . . the war between Servants . . . . Facing a world that she had hitherto thought impossible, all Irisviel could do was stare, transfixed.

At the same time, Saber was experiencing a similar wonder.

Slaughter in war was a piece of cake for her. As a knight who had braved countless battles, she fought her enemies as smoothly

as one would wield a knife and a fork. To the understanding of one like her, a spear was a weapon wielded with both hands. It was common knowledge. To her, Lancer's use of two spears was just a means to confuse the enemy.

Since he was the Heroic Spirit of the Lance, the spear in his hands should be his Noble Phantasm. However, revealing the true name of one's Noble Phantasm in Heaven's Feel was equivalent to exposing one's true identity. The amulets bound onto Lancer's spears must be for concealing the spear's real name. It seems both his Master and he were prudent when it came to concealing their identities.

If that was the case, it would not be hard to explain why he was using two spears. Because Saber did not know which spear was the true Noble Phantasm, she had to fend off attacks from both. Even then, the long spear on the right and the short spear on the left—one of them must be Lancer's true weapon.

Between the habitual weapon and the secondary weapon, feint and proper moves could be distinguished. Saber paid close attention to each of his attacks; she believed that if she could recognize the true lance, her chances of winning would improve immensely. Yet—

Her own attack was deflected for the third time. Saber had to step back and wait for a better opportunity.

"What's wrong, Saber? Your attacks are not working."

She could not return Lancer's taunts. After thirty exchanges, she had not managed to hit her opponent even once.

Lancer swung the lance in his right hand and approached her in a straight run. The swinging shaft covered a wide area, its

strength and speed equaling a two-handed swing. No; precisely because it was used with one hand, there were now many moves that could be used which would not have worked with a two-handed stance. The lance was thrust toward Saber from an unexpected angle.

Nevertheless, a lance had its limitations. Because of its extended length, a gap would inevitably show up between two attacks. During that time, the shorter spear from the left could follow in and continue to hassle Saber. Saber's attack just then was broken by the short spear's immaculate defense.

Simultaneously using two lances, yet making no feint moves. This Heroic Spirit, Lancer, merged the lances in his left and right hands in a seamless choreography. What kind of devotion and practice was necessary to obtain such a strong fighting style?

. . . *This man is good!* Up to that point, Saber was still quivering before this strong opponent in her first battle, but she had now escaped that shadow of fear. Although to a casual observer, Lancer appeared to have the advantage with his incessant attacks, the truth was not so. Lancer was rather exhausted from fending off Saber's attacks since they first engaged. Despite his taunts, he was also powerless to reverse the situation.

For Lancer, who was capable of using his lance with just one hand, dual-wielding both spears—long and short—at the same time would enable him to attack both at long-range and short-range. Taking into account the supremacy of his weaponry, he should not have been forced into his current predicament by Saber and her single sword. However—

How did the sword . . .? Lancer complained silently. Irisviel was not the only one who could not see the movement of the high-speed sword; even Lancer, a Servant himself, had trouble discerning the trajectory of the sword in Saber's hands.

Lancer had no way of knowing that this, too, was one of Heroic Spirit Arturia's Noble Phantasms, the threat of Invisible Air • Barrier of the Wind King. The air surrounding the sword was compacted together with immense amounts of prana, creating impossible refractions of light, rendering the sword invisible. Although it was not much support for the Noble Phantasm, its result was very obvious in melee combat.

Saber attacked her opponent with an invisible swing, and likewise blocked the countering attack with an invisible blade. Lancer's worry was understandable. Even though he could decipher Saber's attacks from her movement, he could not spring any surprise attacks on her due to his inability to judge the length of her blade. Therefore Lancer could only gauge it, keeping himself outside Saber's attacking range; only then could he use his magnificent attacks continuously to their full extent. Despite being able to block all of Saber's attacks, he had yet to find an opportunity to deal her a lethal blow.

This woman is quite good . . .! Facing the enemy he had just met, knowing the time had come for him to fight with his life, a melancholic smile emerged on Lancer's face. The two Heroic Spirits devoted their entire selves to the fight, sparing no thought for the world around them.

No; even if they had stayed on guard, in their current state they would still have been oblivious to another figure slipping

through the terrain. Not only was the newcomer a considerable distance from the sparks of the deadly blade and spear dance, he moved soundlessly in the shadows, and could bypass a Servant's detection with Presence Concealment.

A gust of wind from the sea fluttered the black robe. The sliver of a satisfactory smile emerged on the countenance beneath the white skull mask. No one would have believed that Assassin, eliminated in front of so many witnesses last night, now stood in the evening shopping street.

Assassin hid in the perfect spot to observe the unfolding battle —the crane that loomed beside the cliff. It was situated about 500m away from the skirmish. As a Servant with eyesight surpassing a human's, he could clearly discern the conflict between the two, even spotting their expressions with accuracy. Meanwhile, the two combatants barely had time to consider if they were being spied upon. He could have remained in spiritual form and obtained information from a much closer distance, but in that form his senses would be limited to spiritual detection; and the task his Master had entrusted him with that night was to observe with his eyes. Assassin, who understood his Master's intentions, silently gazed at the battle in the distance in accordance with his order.

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15km away from the warehouse area where the deadly struggle continued, someone sat in darkness within the basement of Fuyuki Church, encased in the silence of night. Although his eyes
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were closed, he was not resting but sitting in silence, his nerves on edge. The jet-black figure took the shape of Kotomine Kirei's priest frock. From his profile, one might think that he was contemplating about certain matters. One would never guess that he was listening to the crooning of the sea breeze, and seeing before his eyes a battle scene full of sparks from the clashing of steel. What he was seeing and hearing was an unknown battle between Servants taking place in the distant warehouses . . . A sight identical to what his Servant Assassin was witnessing.

This was the result of his past three years of study—an ability called shared perception that was taught to him by Tousaka Tokiomi. Using only a prana connection, he was able to share senses with the one who made a contract with him. In Heaven's Feel, the ability to completely monitor a Servant's actions from far was very useful. If one's Servant was Assassin, who was especially skilled in reconnaissance, then that ability was peerless. But if the contractor did not agree to it, the ability could not be used. Tokiomi, who taught this magecraft to Kirei himself, had such a suggestion immediately rejected by Archer. The haughty King of Heroes would not allow another to look through his eyes, not even his own Master. Therefore, the only ones who could achieve this were Kirei and Assassin.

"—Something is happening around the warehouses beside the estuary of the River Mion. It appears that the initial battle has begun."

Kirei spoke, but there was no one in the darkness. Instead, there was an aged phonograph on a table, its brass horn tilted

toward Kirei. As expected, the ordinary antique phonograph replied to his words in a human voice.

"Not the initial; officially, it is the second battle, Kirei." Although the sound was rather distorted, the unconstrained tone filled with composure could only be the voice of Tousaka Tokiomi.

On closer inspection of this antique, while it could be mistaken for a phonograph with an old bell-type horn, beneath the apparatus there was neither a turntable nor stylus. In its place, the end of the horn was connected to a large jewel with a metal wire. The contraption was a prana conductor passed down in the Tousaka family, which Tokiomi had lent to Kirei. A similar prana conductor was placed in the workshop of the Tousaka residence; Tokiomi was also sitting in front of the device. Through synchronised vibration, the jewels on the two contraptions could transmit to each other the vibrations of the air inside their horns. This was the Tousaka family's communication device, born of their jewel magecraft.

As soon as the church of Fuyuki was put into Kotomine Risei's hands, Tokiomi had placed the jewel communicator in the church. Father Risei was Tokiomi's secret supporter, while his son Kotomine Kirei, the first to be defeated, was sent into the church for protection in the beginning of Heaven's Feel. Logically, Tokiomi's goal was to communicate discreetly with these two people. Everything appeared completely normal on the outside; no one would have thought that Kirei could make contact with the outside world. At the same time, Kirei, who was not a magus, thought radios would do the trick as well as the strange contraption would.

The difference between radios and Tousaka's jewel communicator was that conversations taking place through the latter could not be eavesdropped on. Upon further consideration, Tokiomi's prudent behavior was actually more beneficial for Kirei. Whatever the case, right now Assassin and Kirei had replaced Archer as Tokiomi's scouts. Kirei used Assassin's eyes to reconnoiter, and with the clairvoyance of a Master captured every minute detail.

"It . . . appears to be a battle between Saber and Lancer. Saber's abilities are of an extremely high level; it is likely that most of her parameters are near A rank."

"I see. No wonder it is the strongest class. Can you see the Master?"

"I can only see one more person . . . a silver-haired woman standing behind Saber."

"Hmm. It seems Lancer's Master knows he should conceal himself. Not an amateur; he understands the rules of Heaven's Feel. Wait, did you say Saber's Master is a silver-haired woman?"

"Yes. A young Caucasian girl. Silver-haired with red eyes; doesn't look quite human."

The other side of the brass horn contemplated silently.

". . . An Einsbern homunculus? Could they still be making homunculi Masters . . .? Though that is not impossible . . ."

"Are you saying this woman is the Master of the Einsberns?"

"So Jubstacheit's pawns were not limited only to Emiya Kiritsugu . . . It's hard to believe I actually predicted this incorrectly."

For the first time in his life, a curious agitation surged in Kirei's chest; he soon realized it was disappointment.

"All in all, that woman is the key to grasping the flow of Heaven's Feel. Kirei, you must pay close attention."

"I understand. I'll send someone to follow her at all times." Immediately after receiving those mysterious words, Kirei continued to watch the two Heroic Spirits intently. In Kirei's eyes, neither the sparkling collision of blades nor the leaping bursts of prana seemed as bright as they were just moments ago.

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Kiritsugu silently set the Walther up on the mountainous shipping containers, which were piled on the container port beside the seaside cliffs. He took in the progress of the fight using the electronic sights that penetrated the cover of night.

First, the thermographic scope . . . He spotted it. On the screen that displayed cool shades of black and blue, red and orange images emerged conspicuously. A thermo-diagram representing the two of them fused together like a giant flare. Further in the distance, two smaller heat patterns appeared. One of them was standing in the middle of the street witnessing this battle, the other was concealed on the warehouse roofs in a more remote location. Deciding the target of assassination was very easy.

It was indeed Irisviel who stood on the road. She seemed to be declaring that, as the partner of an excellent Saber, she should not hide away but fight a fair battle bravely and in the open. Then the heat signature on the roof would be the enemy Master, The one

controlling Lancer, who was facing Kiritsugu's Saber with dual spears.

Submerged in the darkness, Kiritsugu smiled a cold-hearted smile. These were the best conditions he could hope for. Lancer's Master likely relied on illusions or presence-concealing magecraft to hide his position, thinking it would be enough; he did not consider that it could be countered with mechanical cameras. Like all other magi who died by Kiritsugu's hand, he would walk the same path as them to his destruction. Kiritsugu contacted Maiya, positioned on the other side of the battlefield, with his radio.

"Maiya, Lancer's Master is hiding on top of the warehouses, northeast from where Saber is. Can you see him?"

"No. It is a blind spot from my position."

Where possible, Kiritsugu preferred to coordinate with Maiya, ensuring the accuracy of the attack with a simultaneous second shot. Unfortunately, only Kiritsugu himself could fire at the moment. But it was not a problem; the distance was barely three hundred meters. With his skills, Kiritsugu could take his target's life with just one bullet. As long as he remained unaware of the sniper's presence, no magus could defend himself from a .300 Winchester Magnum round.

Setting up the bipod, Kiritsugu had just started to get into the mood—Suddenly, with a start, he turned the Walther toward the derrick crane. In that moment, all his plans seemed to be ruined. Suppressing his disapproval, he whispered into the radio again.

"Maiya, up on the crane . . ."

"Affirmative here as well. It is as you suspected."

It seems the figure Kiritsugu has seen through the night vision scope was captured in the scope of Maiya's AUG assault rifle too.

Meanwhile, the third party that was scrutinizing the battle between Saber and Lancer had also discovered the silhouette atop the crane.

It was completely unpredicted. In the Holy Grail War, one would logically stay on the sidelines rather than join in the battle eagerly. A clever Master would not step in even if other Servants jumped into the fray, but would choose to keep on observing a fight. Picking on stragglers in the aftermath of a conflict was also a good idea. Even if one was not that fortunate, it would at least allow one to know the enemy's condition.

Kiritsugu, who arrived at the battle scene first, never assumed that this fight would only have one team of observers. He had therefore given up the best position on the crane, instead choosing a place where he could observe that best position as well as the battlefield. The newcomer appeared to be oblivious to the fact that his location was already under surveillance, and occupied that ideal spot to observe the fight. Consequentially, he was exposed to Kiritsugu's line of sight. However, one important factor escaped his calculations.

Kiritsugu once again looked at the pale green shape within the scope. It was an observer he had not seen before. He was covered by a pure black robe, a skull mask over his face. Though hard to believe, it was definitely Assassin, the Servant who was annihilated last night at the Tousaka residence.

Kiritsugu, dissatisfied by the images recorded by Maiya's familiars, was not entirely surprised by the reappearance of the

supposedly dead Assassin. The problem now, aside from the oddity of the situation, was that the one currently on top of the derrick crane was a Servant. If he sniped Lancer's Master now, his opponent would be killed instantly, but at the same time it would also expose the shooter's location. Although Assassin was not a class with decisive combat strength, he was nonetheless a supernatural being—a Servant. As a magus, Kiritsugu could never win in such a fight.

He could not expect Saber to help him; distance-wise, Assassin was far closer to him than Saber was. Besides, Saber was not even aware that Kiritsugu was at the scene; he could not hope for her to come to his aid. Saber was also fully committed in the battle with Lancer. Even though a Servant would lose his prana supply when his Master is killed, the Servant could still remain materialized in this plane with his own strength. Defeating Lancer's Master did not mean that Lancer would immediately be defeated as well.

There was only one thing left—the Command Spells. The authority of the Command Spells was not limited to the scope of the powers of the Servant. If the Servant agreed with the Master's order without resistance, the Command Seal could have effects beyond the Servant's potential, bringing about a miracle. It would not be impossible to instantly transport Saber to Kiritsugu's location to hold off Assassin, but that would leave the defenseless Irisviel directly in front of Lancer.

Kiritsugu gave incessant thought to the problem, combining various elements, and finally came to a conclusion. Although it was the ideal opportunity to finish off Lancer's Master, it would

have to pass for the night. With that decided, it would not do to have doubts about anything else.

"Maiya, keep an eye on Assassin. I'll observe Lancer."

"Understood."

Kiritsugu sighed soundlessly, lowered the bipod of the Walther, and continued calmly observing the scene through the scope.

Since he had decided to abandon this opportunity, Saber's effort tonight was as good as wasted. If she could refrain from showing her Noble Phantasm or escaping immediately with Irisviel, he would have to extend his thanks to her—But she was a haughty and proud Heroic Spirit, and such possibilities were only his conjectures. But it would not be a bad idea to see, just once, how capable his subordinate really is.

"That will depend on you, my lovely King of Knights."

– 154:03:11

The confrontation between Saber and Lancer had not yet progressed beyond competition. Though they started out measuring each other's power thoroughly in a preliminary test, it was beginning to look more like a display of strength.

Of course, even if only a test, the ones engaged in this display were Servants. The avenue was a miserable wreck from the scars carved into it. Two storehouses had already collapsed, and a hundred square meters of asphalt had been torn up. Turned into a battlefield, the area looked like an earthquake had came and gone. In the midst of that disaster, still without a single scratch, Saber and Lancer glared at each other, preparing their next move. Neither showed any sign of exhaustion.

"There's no honor in battling unannounced, but—"

Lancer started speaking with Saber, blood-lust flowing into both tips of his spears, his gaze keeping its freshness.

"Anyway, I have to give you credit. Coming so far without any sweat, you're one heck of a woman."

"Such unnecessary modesty, Lancer." Holding her invisible sword, Saber put a smile on her lips once more.

"Although I do not know your name, you honor me with your spearplay and your compliments. I am thankful for that."

Neither knew the other's history; they had no connection, these two warriors from a different country, but their hearts were surely connected. Both prided themselves on their well-honed skills and their strength. Having met an equal opponent, they paid

mutual respect of their own free will—They both had a warrior's pride in their hearts; the two Heroic Spirits understood as much. But—

"Enough of this playtime, Lancer."

Both Saber and Irisviel were surprised by the cold voice which came from nowhere.

"Lancer's . . . Master?!" Stiffening, Irisviel took a look around , but there was no human form to be seen. She could not tell whether the unnatural echo of the voice came from a man or woman, nor could she locate its source. Perhaps it was camouflage, an illusion. It did not seem the enemy would reveal himself or herself to Irisviel anytime.

"Don't drag this fight out any further. Saber is a formidable enemy. Make it quick—you may unveil your Noble Phantasm."

Saber's face stiffened at the unseen magus's words. Noble Phantasm—He was urging his Servant to bare his fangs seriously.

"Understood, my master."

In contrast to his earlier character, Lancer dropped his voice quietly and changed his weapon grip. Without hesitation, he dropped the short spear in his left hand at his feet.

"Then . . . Is it that long spear?!"

Before Saber's eyes, Lancer peeled off the amulet tightly wrapped around the long spear in his right hand. It was a deep crimson spear. Prana now rose from the tip of the spear like an ominous mirage.

"—That's it. From this point on, I'm out to do you in." Lancer muttered with a low voice, his lethal weapon finally exposed, and changed his stance, holding it with both hands. Likewise, Saber

lowered her sword, measuring the distance between Lancer and her with greater caution.

The exposing of one's Noble Phantasm had two effects.

One—demonstration of the immense power of one's deadliest move as its true name is announced. Take for instance Saber's ultimate secret move. She had Excalibur • the Sword of Promised Victory currently protected behind a bounded field of invisibility, but if she threw away the camouflage and shouted its true name, her sacred sword would blast a stream of light that could mow down a thousand soldiers. Truly an anti-fortress Noble Phantasm that could turn the ground into scorched earth, it was not to be used on a whim, only as a final resort.

Along with it, weapons could also carry the nature of a Noble Phantasm. In Saber's case, her Invisible Air • Bounded Field of the Wind King was such an example. By itself, it did not have the capacity to annihilate the enemy; it was a Noble Phantasm more suited in battle as a piercing weapon. Although not a powerful attack, it was easier to use, and could bring victory if used well employed as a trump card.

Lancer's red spear was probably the latter, by Saber's intuition. He would continue to exchanging blows with Saber. She did not expect the next strike in this fight to be decisive. The two closed the distance, sliding their feet silently but with mounting tension.

Lancer made the first move. Unlike the earlier acrobatic freedom of his spear, this was a much simpler stab in a straight line, a stabbing thrust that guessed at the length of Saber's blade hidden by Invisible Air, casting aside all caution of it. Naturally, Saber repelled Lancer's spear with her sword, ignoring the pain. It

was just a common strike, neither too serious nor too sharp, but . . .

Disaster came like a squall. Between the entangled spear and sword, an abrupt, unexpected gale rolled in and blew around.

"Wha—?!" Exclaiming in shock, Saber retreated three steps from Lancer's spear. Lancer calmly resumed his stance without advancing. Watching the scene, Irisviel could not understand what just happened. The gust of wind only lasted an instant, but it did not emit much prana. It was a wind of enigmatic origin, but definitely no threat from Lancer. Nevertheless, Saber was the only one shocked. Lancer smiled boldly at her astonishment.

"I exposed your precious sword."

Saber, now silent, could not comprehend Lancer's victorious mutter. They both understood the reason behind this mysterious phenomenon. The wind had come from Saber's sword . . . More specifically, it was Invisible Air's doing.

The bounded field of condensed pressure which refracted light had leaked out in an instant. The moment it clashed with Lancer's spear, the prana controlling the wind around the sword had come loose. And at that moment, Lancer had caught a glimpse of the true sword's shape inside the torn bounded field. Lancer's murmur from before was proof that it was definitely his spear which had exposed Invisible Air.

"I know the length of your blade now. You won't get me with that invisible interval again."

Exaggeration or otherwise, Lancer started flinging thrusts. True to his words, the spear strikes suddenly gained in vigor, the attacks more severe and no longer in vain. Having confirmed the

travel of Saber's blade, he made no mistake in his aim. Letting even one thrust through meant a fatal wound—with that understanding, Saber kept moving her body, parrying every single spear strike with her blade. Flickering, the afterimage of the shape of her golden sword flashed with each strike.

"Kh . . ." There was still pressure coming out of Invisible Air, but it was a continuous, random gale violently blowing Saber's blond hair in waves. There was no doubt; Lancer's red spear was draining Invisible Air. Each time it struck the tip of the spear, the golden blade strobed.

"But . . . with that spear . . ."

There was still a way—Saber encouraged herself. A two-handed spear stance; that was a style Saber could deal with. In the midst of uninterrupted strikes, Saber looked for just one poorly aimed attack. Against that, she could twist her body instead of parrying and rely on her armor. A well-placed counter in a near-death situation could be a perfect opportunity.

With a swift movement, Saber struck at Lancer's shoulder. She ignored the tip of the red spear grazing her flank; it should be superficial on her armor. Meanwhile, she would be splitting her enemy at the shoulder—

Saber foresaw the pain, her intuition saving her from a lost cause. Her sword dropping in mid-air, Saber turned over and threw herself on the side. It was hard to say if it had been a close call. Lancer's howling spear definitely seemed to have spilled blood. Rolling on the ground, Saber escaped Lancer's pursuit and stood up immediately to track her opponent. Her eyes betrayed her pain.

"Saber!" Witnessing the disturbance, Irisviel released prana to heal Saber's flank.

"—Thank you, Irisviel, I'm fine. Your healing is working." Despite her words, Saber was holding her side; there were still traces of pain.

"It seems victory will not be gained so easily . . ." Muttering, Lancer did not seem too discouraged, and spoke with a rather bemused voice. Visibly, this man greatly enjoyed competing against his formidable enemy. Gritting her teeth, Saber calmly assembled the puzzle in her mind, and the hardly believable circumstances pieced themselves together.

Her armor should have blocked Lancer's spear. Nevertheless, the tip of the spear had Saber's blood on it. And right now, Saber's armor was the same as ever, without a scratch. Possibly, when the spear came into contact, the blade passed through the armor as though it had vanished.

Saber could not dematerialize herself, but she could materialize her battle outfit, and also cancel it. In other words, Saber's armor was knit out of prana and was not material in reality, unlike the clothes Irisviel bought. It was incomprehensible that Invisible Air could be cracked . . . The contact with Lancer's spear had created a fissure in the bounded field that generated the wind.

". . . I see. I figured out the mystery of your spear, Lancer." Saber murmured inaudibly, reflecting once more upon the toughness of her formidable enemy.

That red spear could cut off prana. Nevertheless, it was not powerful enough to break or cancel the source of the magecraft. Saber's armor was still fine, and Invisible Air still functioned

correctly. The spear was effective only at the instant it touched the blade. In that instant, it had cut off the flow of prana and rendered it powerless.

Indeed it was a Noble Phantasm not prided on power, but its ability still posed quite a threat. It was not an exaggeration to say that the quality of a Servant's weapon was determined by the prana or the magical abilities it carried. But in the hands of this Lancer, it could still dominate a Servant of boastful armament.

"You'll have to give up on the protection of your armor, Saber. Before my spear, you're as good as naked."

Saber snorted at Lancer's bantering words.

"You would triumph at shaving a bit of my armor?" Recognizing the threat of Lancer's spear, Saber still had no fear in her heart. The situation had not been decided yet.

The silver armor covering Saber's entire body scattered with a splash. Irisviel gulped in surprise. Lancer observed. The chest plate, the gauntlets, the long skirt-shaped tassets that protected the legs—nothing was left. Saber had removed her armor herself. The fragments of the armor scattering into metallic dust immediately disappeared like a mist as Saber cut off the prana supply.

"If I cannot defend against your spear, then I have only to strike instead. Prepare yourself, Lancer."

Clothed in a blue, light dress, Saber resumed her stance. Lowering her posture with her sword held behind, she confronted Lancer with legs in tandem. There was no consideration for defense; this stance was intended for a lethal strike that would slice from shoulder to shoulder. It was clearly visible to anyone

that Saber intended to finish the battle with the next strike, her life completely at risk.

"Such bravery. All or nothing, is it?" Lancer somehow seemed satisfied at having found again what he had missed, but the tension in his tone of voice was clearly noticeable. Having taken off her armor, Saber gained not only agility, but the use of the prana—previously required to create and maintain her armor—for offense. This meant a lot for the Prana Burst skill that Saber possessed.

A Prana Burst was the accumulation of prana in her weapon and her entire body, and the momentary injection of an arbitrary vector, for an exceptional boost of her abilities. So to speak, it was a jet blast of prana for movement. She only had the thin body of a small girl, but this was the secret that allowed her to brandish her big sword with the combat style of a power fighter.

Typically, surplus prana could be converted to mobility for close-range combat, but if Saber used even the prana needed for her armor in a Prana Burst, it would grant her six times that in a power and speed bonus . . . Perfect for the destructive power of a one-hit-kill attack. The handicap of losing the armor was outweighed by the advantage. This was Saber's conclusion in dealing with Lancer's "spear of exorcism."

"Such heroism. It's a brave decision. I can't say I hate to see that . . ."

Like a matador facing a mad bull, he kept provoking her by lightly shifting from side to side in a lowered position.

"If I dare say, that was my plan, Saber."

Unperplexed by those words, Saber replied boldly.

"How about it? How will you feel after receiving this?"

Lancer understood. Saber's next charge would render the long spear's advantage of range meaningless. If he could not grasp Saber's speed, he would meet his end when she split him in two.

Calmly studying her opponent's light footwork, Saber measured the timing of her strike. Lancer too was probably estimating the speed of her charge from the density of prana she put in her body. But she still had one more secret ready for that . . .

By a little, just by a little, Lancer's movement weakened. The asphalt torn up into gravel created many obstacles for a good foothold. Lancer's movement had stagnated a little when he put strength into his legs.

Saber did not miss it. A loud bang roared into the atmosphere. The golden sword, previously invisible, overturned the darkness of night with its brilliance. The Invisible Air that compressed the air and refracted light like an illusion could be used in another way. The instant the bounded field is released, it could blow the opponent with a long distance strike—a gale of ultra-high pressure made from the condensed air. That was Saber's plan. By holding the sword back in a wide stance, she could accelerate the air strike even more.

Released from the golden sword, a jet of air burst forth from behind Saber. By releasing her armor to boost her prana burst, she turned her body into a supersonic bullet. At this point, Saber was three times faster than normal. It was already too late for an ambush attack or an evasion the instant she stepped forward. Even if Lancer's spear could deal a serious wound to Saber, he would receive a lethal strike that same instant. That was certainly a strike

that put one's life at risk for certain victory; one must be ready to have one's flesh cut or bones severed. As Saber broke through the wall of air at several times the speed of sound, the shockwave of the rush scattered the surrounding rubble like leaves.

Lancer did not move. Having given up on an ambush attack, the tip of the red spear did not flinch. What moved instead were his legs. With an extremely focused mind, the flow of time, shorter than an instant, stretched and slowed.

In that moment, Saber knew—the opening in Lancer's defense was a bluff. It was no coincidence that Lancer missed a step; he had placed himself to stop at the right position. The position Lancer had chosen for his victory was the spot where he had switched from two spears to one, dropping the short spear in his left hand.

Lancer's word replayed in her mind. "That was my plan." Saber saw it at that time—Lancer's threatening smile when he was sure of his victory. The glint in his eyes spoke more than his words did. "I will strike through your impudence . . ." Instead of picking up the spear with his arm, Lancer kicked the gravel at his feet, but gravel was not the only thing that flew into the air. The tip of the short spear sprang up accurately through the air, in Saber's direction. The amulet wrapped around the spear—just like the long one—was already unfastened, revealing the yellow metal under it.

Saber's sixth sense could surpass thought in battle—a natural talent for decision—but it did not predict her blunder. One would normally wield a spear with both hands; that was the trap of the misconception. She had regarded the ability to wield a spear in

each arm as a bluff. If that was Lancer's way with the spear . . . If that Servant was the Heroic Spirit known as the bearer of the two demonic spears . . . Yes, another Noble Phantasm—Servants were definitely not limited to only one.

The short spear which Lancer had kicked up, prana swirling around its sinister tip like the long red spear, glared at Saber. It was already predicting the instant it would pierce Saber's throat, as she could only charge forward, too late to brake . . .

Act 4

– 153:59:42

"... Damn it. This is bad." Rider, standing on the arch of the Fuyuki Bridge and overlooking the battle taking place in the warehouse district, muttered softly as he stood up.

"Wh-what is?" Seeing the giant Servant impatient for the first time, Waver became agitated and questioned Rider while clinging to the steel frame.

"Lancer brought out a decisive technique. Seems he wants the match decided quickly."

"Wouldn't that be favorable for us?"

"Fool, what are you talking about?" Rider stomped his heel heavily on the steel frame he was standing on. The tremor shook Waver, his body plastered to the frame, to his very bones, and another shriek rose.

"I wanted to wait out the battle's development before everyone arrives, but by the look of things, Saber's going to have a disadvantage, and it would be too late to attack by then."

"Too late?—Didn't you want to strike when they have all become exhausted from fighting each other?"

"... I think you misunderstood my intentions, boy." Rider furrowed his brows and tilted his head to look at the Master lying beside his feet, disappointed by the performance of the humorless clown.

"I did hope that other Servants would take up Lancer's bait. Isn't it obvious? Rather than picking them out one by one, it's better to get them all together and have a great battle royal!"

Waver forgot to answer; his realization of the difference in their understanding shocked him out of his wits. "Get them all together ... A great battle royal?"

"Yes. It's such a rare opportunity to cross blades with the greatest heroes from each age. If all six of them are here, I won't let any one of them get away." A fierce and dangerous growl rumbled from Rider's throat, but there was a tint of laughter as he curled the ends of his lips upwards. Waver realized that only this man could wear a grin like that.

"Now then. Saber and Lancer—they both have the flaming spirit of true warriors. I admire them; it would be a pity to let them die like this."

"What else is there to it apart from killing them?! Isn't that the point of the Holy Grail—Waaa—!"

Waver's slightly hysterical voice was mercilessly interrupted by a smack to his forehead.

"Victory without ruin, domination without disgrace. That is true conquest!"

Rider proclaimed with his chest held upright. He unsheathed the sword by his waist and sliced through the hollow sky with a swing, cleaving apart the empty space. An enormous shining Noble Phantasm immediately appeared, accompanied by spiraling torrents of galloping prana. Waver, feeling like he was about to be blown over by the sudden storm, swallowed his screams and hugged the steel frame even tighter.

"Observation is over. Let us join the battle, boy." Before he finished those words, Rider, his mantle flowing, had mounted the Noble Phantasm with a leap.

"Idiot idiot idiot! You're being nonsensical!"

"Oh? If you don't want to go, you can stay here and watch."

"I'll go! Bring me along, idiot!"

"Good, that's more like my Master!" Rider, laughing brightly, lifted Waver by the collar gently and let him ride beside himself.

"Now roll on, Gordius Wheel • Wheel of Heaven's Authority!" The Noble Phantasm answered the call of the King of Conquerors with a thunderous tremor.

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Gales surged in a confusion of life and death. As swordswoman and spearman slid past each other, flowers of bright crimson blood fluttered and bloomed briefly before fading away in the blink of an eye.

Saber charged past and stopped. The two of them turned simultaneously and stood erect, the intention to battle not fading even for an instant. Both Heroic Spirits were still in one piece.

Finally, there was a chance the battle might shift away from a mere trading of blows. At the critical moment, Saber took in the situation and made a quick decision that prolonged their duel. The yellow short spear, poised to pierce Saber, did not land on her chest, but on her left arm. At the same time, Saber's golden sword, directed in an upthrust, deviated just a little from Lancer's vitals, its edge aimed at Lancer's left arm—curiously, both were injured in the same place. But did they suffer the same injury?

"You still won't let me win easily . . . That adamant manner of yours is most excellent."

Lancer stared at Saber with a desolate smile, desperately trying not to pay attention to the his elbow wound. Expectedly, like a film on rewind, Lancer's injury was healed without any contact, and left no trace behind. A Servant's self-healing would not allow him to recover that quickly; it must be the healing mageacraft of his hidden, observing Master.

Unlike Lancer, Saber's pain and anxiety could not be hidden even by her demure beauty. There was a definite imbalance in power between Lancer's airborne spear and the sword clutched tightly in Saber's two hands. By appearances, the wound dealt by the short spear on Saber's forearm was rather light compared to Lancer's injury.

"Irisviel, heal my wound as well."

"I healed it! I did, but . . ." Irisviel was even more flustered than the injured Saber.

She was undoubtedly a first-rate magus; the strength and intensity of her craft needed no mention. An exception even in the world of magi, she possessed a body designed and manufactured

for the sake of magecraft. It was impossible for her to make any mistakes in basic magecraft such as healing. On the off-chance that it does happen, Irisviel would know how to deal with it herself. And yet—

"No, the healing did work. You are at full health, Saber."

Saber, not daring to lower her guard, measured Lancer cautiously, at the same time staring at the injury on her left arm. The wound did not bleed much and was quite shallow, but the sinews were severed. The most important digit on her hand, the thumb, could not be moved; she could not exert enough strength to grip the sword hilt. She knew there was nothing wrong with Irisviel's healing methods, but the arm had not been cured. Her crippled left thumb was completely immobile.

Lancer paid no attention to Saber, nor did he resume his attack. Full of confidence, he bent down and retrieved with his left hand the yellow short spear which had fell to the ground.

"Before my Noble Phantasm, Gáe Dearg • Crimson Rose of Exorcism, it is good that you realized armor is useless."

Perhaps he thought it pointless to keep up the masquerade after demonstrating the effects of his Noble Phantasm; Lancer spoke the true name of his Noble Phantasm with no hesitation.

"But you were rash to discard your armor. Had you not done so, you would still have had some defense against Gáe Buidhe • Golden Rose of Mortality."

Lancer, the long red spear in his right hand and the short yellow spear in his left, began to swing them exaggeratedly as one would spread a pair of wings, in exactly the same manner as when

the battle first began. It was not a gesture to seduce, but a unique battle style mastered through arduous training.

"I understand now. It is a cursed spear. Wounds dealt by it would never heal. I should have noticed this earlier."

A crimson spear that severed prana, a cursed golden spear, a love spot below his left eye that attracted women—it was easy to figure out once they were put together. Based on legends, the glorious name praised by the Celtic legends of heroes was actually remotely related to King Arthur. It was quite incredulous that this had not occurred to Saber.

"The first warrior of the Knights of Fianna: Diarmuid of the Love Spot. I did not know the Grail had granted you the honor of participating in this war."

"Therein lies the beauty of this war for the Holy Grail. But the honor is mine. For one who has traversed time and space to join the Throne of Heroes by invitation would not mistake your golden sword for any other."

This Servant, a participant in the fourth Holy Grail War, was Lancer—the Heroic Spirit of the Celts, Diarmuid Ua Duibhne. Lancer, feeling refreshed despite the careless blowing of his cover, narrowed his eyes.

"To compete against the famous King of Knights for revenge on your sword blow—Hmph, I would not give up this opportunity either."

As Heroic Spirits separated by time, they had no historical connections. Through the legends of the past from the era that invited them forth, they got to know about heroes that came after

them. Diarmuid also knew of the legend of King Arthur which brought fame to his homeland after his time.

"Since our names are known to each other, I challenge you as a knight to determine the victor of this mundane battle—although I have already wounded your arm. Do you find this unfair, Saber?"

"Ridicule me not. 'Tis more shameful to earn your worry over such a small injury of mine." Saber declared resolutely, while gritting her teeth with hatred deep in her heart.

Just one blow was not a big deal . . . Once again, Saber gathered her prana to wrap herself in silver armor. Although it would be a waste before Lancer's Gáe Dearg, it could still block the critical blow from Gáe Buidhe. Saber compressed the surrounding air, once more sealing her golden sword inside Invisible Air • Boundary of the Wind King.

Her wound could not be healed. The curse of the golden spear most likely would not be dispelled until the spear itself was destroyed, or its owner Diarmuid had fallen. She had to break through Lancer's twin spears with her remaining right hand. With the aid of prana bursts, single-handedly wielding her sword would not be too painful. But the strength that could only be delivered with both hands was now sealed, and she could not use her ultimate attack: Excalibur • Sword of Promised Victory.

Far from cowering, her fighting spirit now soared. It was a meticulous plan to use one of his two Noble Phantasms first, and cunningly lure his enemy into carelessness. Saber was not angry at the trick; rather, she eagerly wanted to applaud Lancer's scheme. The enemy was perfect. To encounter such a flawless enemy in her first battle of the Holy Grail War; as a warrior who

lived by the sword, her fighting spirit was encouraged by the opportunity. At the same time, Diarmuid ua Duibhne, standing opposite Saber, was also forcing himself to face her not only with tricks, but all of his wits in this ultimate battle.

Lancer sensed Saber's vigor without words. A satisfied grin crept up his mouth. He felt the same way as she. He admired Saber for sacrificing her left arm to block the surprise attack of his Gáe Buidhe which was unleashed for the kill. That admiration would add an extra sheen to the joy of winning this battle. As knights, each Heroic Spirit echoed the other's desire to do battle.

"Prepare yourself, Saber. I will win this time."

"Only if I do not win first, Lancer."

The two exchanged bold provocations as each planned their next, fatal attack, slowly and cautiously approaching the other. The holy sword and demonic spear were at the edge of an explosive situation. The air, cold, clear and full of tension, was suddenly cleaved by a thunderous ruckus.

"—?!"

Saber and Lancer, silenced in awe, both turned to look at the south-eastern sky. There, the source of the sound was clearly visible to all eyes. A flying object drew a straight line across the sky and was headed directly at them, shedding violet sparks of lightning in its trail which created that characteristic sound. Irisviel was dumbstruck, her mouth agape in shock.

"... A chariot ...?"

It appeared to be an antique chariot with two prows. In place of war horses, handsome bulls with muscles rippling like waves were yoked on the shaft. Their hooves ploughed the empty space,

pulling the luxurious, splendid chariot forward. No, the chariot was not merely floating. The wheels boomed; it was not solid ground but lightning that the bulls stood upon. Each time the bulls' hooves and the chariot stomped upon the sky, violet lightning spread like a web, rolling the air upwards with a deafening roar. The prana that spurted from the lightning could only be matched if Lancer and Saber unleashed every single ounce of their strength. Only a Servant's Noble Phantasm could be so strange, or emit so much prana. Without a doubt, a third Servant had decided to interrupt Saber and Lancer's duel by showing himself.

Saber and Lancer both tensed and stared at the suddenly arriving chariot in silence. Irisviel's alarm was obvious, and the unseen Master of Lancer should also have felt a shiver of fear. To be enveloped by such an enormous aura of lightning and thunder, the Heroic Spirit was most likely some sort of thunder god. And a thunder god with a connection to bulls; the first one that came to mind would be the highest god of Mount Olympus. Although this chariot could not be called a Heroic Spirit itself, even as a Heroic Spirit's armament it was very threatening.

The lightning-treading chariot circled above Lancer and Saber menacingly, then slowed down and landed. It was positioned exactly between the two Heroic Spirits, blocking both sword and lance. The dazzling light that ceased as the chariot landed revealed the figure of a muscular man, poised with commanding presence at the helm of the chariot.

"Both of you, put down your arms. A king has come!"

This casual bellow was almost as loud as the thunder that rolled when he rode upon the air. The fiery glare had almost the power to reflect the opposing sword blade and spear tip. Lancer and Saber, famous Heroic Spirits both, would not be scared by a yell or two. However, this new Heroic Spirit did not seek to attack them, but joined in only to intervene in their duel. The two of them began to hesitate, unable to comprehend such an action.

The imposing owner of the chariot, having dented Lancer and Saber's vigor, continued speaking sternly.

"My name is Alexander, King of Conquerors. I participate in this Holy Grail War as Rider."

The bold declaration utterly astounded all who were present. In the war of the Holy Grail, no Servant would declare his identity, giving away clues to his battle plans. Most agitated of all was Waver, sitting beside Rider.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing, moron?!" His fear of Rider's looming bulk already forgotten, Waver shrieked at Rider while grasping the mantle of the King of Conquerors.

Bish—the merciless finger flick echoed in the night, and the protesting voice died down; the only attention it got came from the middle finger of Rider's right hand. Rider asked, glancing at Lancer and Saber on either side of him.

"You who slaughter each other for the sake of obtaining the Grail: I want to ask you something before you engage again. I don't know what expectations you have of the Grail. But now, consider for a moment whether your wishes are even greater than the desire to possess all of earth and heaven."

Although Saber still did not understood what he meant, her instincts told her that those words were full of danger. Her pupils widened subconsciously.

"What do you want to say?"

"Hum? I believe I was quite clear." Rider maintained his dignity, but his voice became more gentle and amicable.

"I have descended upon the battlefield; do you have any intention of passing up the Holy Grail to me? If you forfeit your claim to the Grail, I will regard you as friends, and share with you the joy of conquering the world."

—A random suggestion. Saber was dazed before she could even feel angry. Standing opposite her, Lancer was also stunned speechless. Here was Alexander, King of Conquerors, an extraordinary Heroic Spirit indeed. Certainly, there existed no one else like him in all human history, none so eager to manifest his ambition of conquering the world. What of Rider's suggestion? Suddenly jumping out like that, proudly declaring his true name and demanding the respect of others before he had shown his worth in battle—those were the actions of one with no desire to join the war for the Holy Grail. It was the first time anyone had seen something like this; discerning whether it was a wise decision or a foolish move was difficult.

"I admire your boldness in declaring your identity just then, yet . . . I find it hard to agree to your proposals."

Lancer shook his head with a bitter smile, but there was no laughter in his eyes. Sparks flew from a glare as intimidating as a sharp sword, colliding head-on with the scornful sideways glance of the King of Conquerors.

"I will be the one to lift the Grail; that is the oath I took with the only new king of this era. The one to hold the Grail in his hands will not be you, Rider."

"... Did you stop my duel with Lancer just to declare this nonsense?"

Saber immediately followed Lancer's words with her question. Her expression was different from the beautiful spearman's; there was no laughter to be found. Rider's suggestion was extremely aggravating to one as serious as she.

"Your joke was overdone, King of Conquerors. This humiliation is unbearable for a knight."

Lancer and Saber both cast hostile glares at Rider. Rider mumbled as though troubled, massaging his temples with his knuckles subconsciously. Although Rider appeared to be running out of plans, his majestic pose did not change at all. He was rather rare in that regard.

"... Are you offering me terms?"

"Enough!"

Feeling that Rider might make some attempt at flattery, Lancer and Saber simultaneously refused him. Saber continued with disappointment written on her face.

"Furthermore, I am lord who rules the kingdom of Britain. No matter what kind of king one is, one can never bow before another lord."

"Oh? The king of Britain?" Rider, showing an interest in Saber's declaration, raised his eyebrows. "How surprising. The renowned King of Knights is actually a young girl."

"—And would you like to try the blade of that young girl, King of Conquerors?" Saber lifted her sword and lowered her voice. Her left hand was still powerless to hold the sword; its four fingers were just resting on the hilt. The fighting spirit that rose wavering from the blade, however, was more solemn and majestic then it was earlier. Rider furrowed his brows and sighed lengthily.

"My—a breakdown of negotiations, eh? What a waste. That's too bad." As Rider looked down and mumbled to himself, he met a glance, full of hatred, that looked up from beside his feet.

"Ri—de—er . . ."

Still feeling the pain from his swollen forehead, but bearing a regret more tragic than it, Waver's deep cries sounded through the air.

"*Now* what? Repeating the same words about conquest, and still earning the ire of others. Do you really think you can beat Saber and Lancer?"

The stocky Servant faced his Master's questions without remorse, and laughed heartily instead.

"Er, well, wasn't there a saying which goes 'actions speak louder than words'?"

"And do those actions involve saying your true name out loud like that?!"

Waver was dizzy with anger. he continued to hammer at Rider's breastplate, breaking out in tears, while Rider just stood there. Looking at this sad situation, Irisviel felt neither contempt nor sympathy. She just felt she could take no more. The atmosphere had subtly relaxed, when—

"Oh? It is you, of all people."

—It suddenly tensed again as the low, resentful voice crept along the ground. It was the still-concealed Master of Lancer. He had gone quiet after urging Lancer to use his Noble Phantasm. Now, he interjected to ask Waver's purpose in coming here. It sounded completely different from the tone earlier; something that exposed a heart drunk with hatred.

"And I was wondering what you had stolen my Holy Relic for in your outrage—I did not think you actually had the guts to join Heaven's Feel on your own, Waver Velvet."

Waver heard someone calling his name with malice, and knew he was the subject of that hatred. He could guess the owner of that voice.

"Ah . . . uh . . ."

How could he not have predicted it? As a lecturer of Clock Tower, Holy Relics for other Heroic Spirits could still be prepared even if Alexander's cloak was stolen. Therefore, here in Fuyuki, it should not be surprising to see this man standing before him as an enemy.

"What a pity. A shame, really. I only wished for my poor, beloved student to be happy. Waver, someone as mediocre as you only deserves only the calm, stable life of a commoner."

Waver was dazed with delusion, unable to determine where the voice was coming from. He had lost count of the times he experienced that nauseating feeling in his stomach—Lecturer Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald. The feeling of those crystal blue eyes, holding a gaze of humiliation and pity, glaring down from the lecturer's mean and slender face somewhere above his head—Waver felt it acutely once again. He was dying to return a few

smart remarks to the lecturer. He had skilfully made the Heroic Spirit Alexander a Servant who obeyed him, before his lecturer managed to do the same. Was that not the best revenge for the humiliation he suffered at Clock Tower all this time?

Yes. We are no longer teacher and student. He is now my true enemy. I can hate him as much as I want, even going as far as taking his life. He is undoubtedly my true enemy now. During the few years Waver spent at Clock Tower, he hated that haughty lecturer at every waking and sleeping moment, and a few times even entertained thoughts of killing him—yet, this was the first time he had faced such enmity from his lecturer. The young boy experienced the true gaze of a magus for the first time—a gaze pregnant with the desire to kill.

However, the feeling was mutual. The sharp-sighted owner of the voice caught the petrified fear on Waver's face. With a tone of icy mockery that set Waver's hair standing on end, he continued to menace Waver playfully.

"Well, I can't help it, little Waver. Let me tutor you a little longer. The true meaning of the slaughter between magi—I will teach you without reservation the terror and pain of the kill. You should be proud."

Waver was already shivering with fear, paying no heed to the humiliation brought by those words. To be a true magus, one must be prepared to be killed. Waver, previously knowing this theory only through books, now keenly comprehended its teachings. The glare, shot from who-knows-where, was more lethal still. The moment a magus wanted to kill is the moment the

death sentence is pronounced—Waver did not understand that until now.

Something enfolded the slender, lone shoulders of the boy shivering from terror, in a gentle, powerful embrace. Waver was befuddled by the rough yet gentle touch. The hand of the stalwart Servant, coarse fingers thick with calluses, previously only induced dread from the short Master.

"Oi, magus. If I am not mistaken, you were supposed to be my Master instead of this kid."

Rider called out to the unseen Master, whose face was covered, twisted by a huge smile of malevolent pity.

"Ridiculous! A man who deserves to be my Master should be a warrior who rides with me into the battlefield, not a coward who does not even dare to show his face."

Silence descended; only the anger of the unseen Master could be felt spreading across the night's air. Rider suddenly laughed into the empty sky, a roaring laugh that exhausted the air in his lungs.

"Come on out! There must be others; friends hiding in the darkness, spying on us!"

Saber and Lancer were both shocked.

"—What are you doing, Rider?"

Facing an inquiring Saber, the King of Conquerors gave a thumbs-up accompanied by a hearty smile.

"Saber and Lancer, your battle is most excellent and fine. The clear sound of sword and spear clashing would have attracted more than one Heroic Spirit, don't you agree?"

Irisviel trembled at the thought that Kiritsugu might have been discovered in his unknown hiding place, but Rider only had other Servants in mind. Delivering the deafening sound to every corner of the surroundings, he bellowed once again.

"What a shame. What a shame, really! You heroes of might gathered here at Fuyuki! Seeing the prowess displayed by Saber and Lancer, does it not invoke any sentiment from you? Bearing a name deserving of praise, yet concealing yourself and spying in secrecy; what cowardice! Even Heroic Spirits would be troubled upon hearing this, huh?"

After another fit of laughter, Rider tilted his head with a fearless expression at the corner of his mouth, and ended with a challenging glance.

"You Heroic Spirits invited by the Holy Grail, gather here this moment! Those too cowardly to show their faces, spare yourself the humiliation that Alexander, King of Conquerors, will deal to you. Prepare yourself!"

Rider's enthusiastic speech reached even Emiya Kiritsugu, who was hiding in the distant container port conducting his observation. It was also heard by Maiya, opposite Kiritsugu's position. The minds of ancient heroes were so far removed from Kiritsugu's own that he could not even sigh in response.

"... That fool managed to conquer the world?"

"..."

On the opposite end of the intercom, Maiya likewise could not understand the situation.

Like Kiritsugu and Maiya, Kirei in his secret observation also saw all of Rider's actions and heard his senseless words through

Assassin's eyes and ears. From the distant Fuyuki church, Kirei had informed Tousaka Tokiomi of everything he saw and heard via the jewel communicator beside him.

"... This is bad." The irate response was heard from the distant Tousaka residence. Kirei furrowed his brows—although he knew the speaker could not see him—and nodded.

"Indeed, it is."

Tokiomi and Kirei did not disregard Rider's drivel like Emiya Kiritsugu did. They both knew one particular Heroic Spirit who would not ignore a challenge like that.

– 153:53:08

A golden light accompanied Rider's bellow. As the light petered out, no surprise remained among the spectators. Without guessing, one could tell that a fourth Servant had made an appearance, in response to Rider's provocation. The gathering of the four Servants signaled the beginning of hostilities—a dreadful prospect. Nobody could possibly conjecture what the next turn of events would be.

As expected, the golden light came from atop a street pole, ten meters above, where a figure in shining armor could be seen standing. Waver held his breath at the sight of such dazzling dignity.

"This guy is . . ."

He had seen him for only an instant previously, but there was no mistaking such an intense existence. The one standing calmly atop the street light was none other than the enigmatic Servant who had sent into oblivion with overwhelmingly destructive power, Assassin who was invading the Tousaka mansion the previous night.

This man, his entire body covered in armor, could not be Caster; and if he had materialized in response to Rider's call, it meant he had the sense to recognize the provocation, thus he could not be Berserker either. By elimination, the only possibility left was—the last of the three Knight classes, Archer.

"I did not expect to see in one night two fools who have the insolence to call themselves 'kings,' yet would ignore me." With

these first words, the displeased golden Heroic Spirit looked from above at the three Servants with a scornful glare. His arrogance and tone, though comparable to Rider's haughtiness, differed in nature. Such cruelty and mercilessness was not present in the voice and gaze of the King of Conquerors. Even Rider had not expected anyone more domineering than himself to show up, as he was stroking his chin with a bewildered look void of malice.

"You are mistaken. I, Alexander, am the one who is well known throughout the world as the King of Conquerors."

"Fool. The only hero in Heaven and on Earth who is a real king, is I. The rest are a bunch of curs."

Archer brushed him aside with a reviling declaration. Color had already drained from Saber's face, but the tolerant Rider drew an amazed sigh, ignoring it altogether.

"Before you say this much, should you not announce yourself first? Would such a king be ashamed of his fame?"

At Rider's banter, Archer's crimson eyes grew with proud anger as he glared at the giant under him.

"Are you questioning me? A lowly cur questioning a king like me?"

Frankly, Rider's point was not unreasonable, but to Archer it was incorrigibly disrespectful. It had nothing to do with protecting interests by concealing one's true name, but rather, came about from personal irritability; the golden Heroic Spirit was releasing an unmistakeable murderous intent.

"I have granted you the honor of my presence, yet you could not recognize me; such ignorance does not deserve to live." At Archer's conclusion, the space around him distorted in a haze—

the next instant, the glow of beautiful blades protruded from the empty space. Bare blades as well as spears; each of them decorated with eye-catching ornaments, emitting a fierce magical power. Clearly they were not common weapons, but Noble Phantasms.

By now, it was doubtless that this demonstration was the same as the previous night's—the mysterious attack that had wiped out Assassin one-sidedly. The ones who had observed the Tousaka mansion the previous night understood that.

"... H!"

Waver was struck with awe. The unseen Master of Lancer gulped. Kiritsugu and Maiya, observing from great distance, felt the tension as well. And now, one man—one who, like Rider and Waver, had followed Lancer's movements throughout the day, and now observed while hidden in the storehouses ... Like the other man spying on the battlefield through the vision of a familiar, he stared at Archer's strange battle preparation.

Yes, it was undoubtedly the same. Archer was definitely the golden Servant who had defended the Tousaka mansion from Assassin's invasion the previous night. In other words, this was Tousaka Tokiomi's Servant.

"Haha, hahahaha ..." In the darkness, an old hatred burning in his one bloodshot eye, Matou Kariya let a laugh escape. Now was the time he had anxiously waited for. He had endured a year of living hell, looking forward to this instant.

Tousaka Tokiomi ... Husband of Aoi and the father of Sakura, and also the man who had trampled the happiness of both mother and child. The hated, cursed, sworn enemy who had taken everything that Kariya wished for; the one who defiled it all.

Now, old resentment was cleared away. This was the time to face that man, changing the hatred boiling in his heart into a sword.

"Kill him . . ." The hatred filling his voice brought unimaginable pleasure. Kariya now understood the meaning of the saying *revenge is a dish best served cold.*

Tokiomi himself could wait; his Servant must first be demolished, to make him lose the Holy Grail War. The thought of Tokiomi's face, smeared in frustrating humiliation, incited him to maddening excitement.

"Kill him, Berserker! Pulverize that Archer!"

At the same time elsewhere, an unexpected torrent of prana was swept in a roar. Under the watchful gaze of all present, the flowing prana gathered and solidified, materializing into the shadow of a well-built man.

The shadow straightened near the four-lane road that just then was Saber's and Lancer's battlefield, at a spot two blocks further toward the sea. Truly, it was a fantastic apparition that could only be described as a shadow. Judging by the width of the tall figure's shoulders, this was the body of a man, completely covered in full armor with no opening. It was different from the silver armor wrapping Saber or the luxurious golden armor of Archer; this man's armor was black, without any delicate ornament or polished luster. Like darkness, like Hell, it was just bottomless black. The face, also invisible, was covered by a rustic helmet. In the depth of a thinly carved slit was the ghastly glow of a pair of eyes, a glare burning like a flame.

A Servant; plain fact. But which Heroic Spirit did the sinister appearance belong to? This black knight had none of the radiance that bore the other Servants who were already gathered—the glow possessed by Arturia, Diarmuid, Alexander the King of Conquerors, as well as the yet unannounced golden Archer—the expression of a Heroic Spirit's pride, the honor of the legends acclaimed and desired by all. This was an essential element of their Noble Phantasm.

But the newly appeared black knight had none of it. In that sense he was closer to Assassin. The darkness around the black armor harbored a *negative* surge. Rather than a Heroic Spirit, one might label him a vengeful spirit instead.

"Hey, King of Conquerors. Did you invite that guy too?" Still observing the black knight carefully, Lancer railed at Rider with a light tone. Rider grimaced at the verbal jab.

"Invited, eh? That one doesn't look like he'll take any negotiation, ugh."

Nothing but blood-lust flowed from the black knight. Even the whirlwind of prana seemed ominous, like a groan filled with deep hatred. *Berserker!* The unanimous conclusion needed no confirmation. Such a fiendish surge of murderous intent could only come from the Heroic Spirit of Fury.

"So, kid. What kind of Servant is he?" Rider asked Waver, but the small Master shook his head, dumbfounded.

". . . I don't know. I simply can't tell."

"What? You're a Master, aren't you? His strong and weak points should be visible to you, eh?"

A Master who had made a contract with a Servant could read the status of a Servant using powers of clairvoyance. This was a unique ability granted by the Grail which had summoned the Heroic Spirits. It would not work for fake Masters such as Irisviel, but Waver, rightful Master of Rider, could see the other Servants' abilities and compare them to Rider's, so as to guide him most efficiently in battle. He already had a clear understanding of the faculties of Saber, Lancer and Archer. But—

"I said I can't see it! That black guy is definitely a Servant, But I can't tell anything about his stats!"

Rider frowned suspiciously at Waver's confused explanation, and looked anew at the black knight. The armor, colored by darkness, revealed no characteristic features and left no clue about the lineage of its maker. . . . No, not for lack of details; it was all blurred.

Not only Rider, but Saber, Lancer and Irisviel had also noticed the same thing. No matter how carefully one watched, one could not perceive Berserker's figure precisely. Like out-of-focus photography, the outlines of the black armor were continuously shifting like a mist, and occasionally one would even see a double or triple outline. Somehow, the material seemed to be made of hallucinations. Vision was not the only affected perception; their Masters' clairvoyance was likewise degraded as well. It was likely some sort of unique curse that disguised the bearer's true identity; it could not be a skill proper to the Berserker class.

"Looks like another troublesome enemy we have here . . ."

Saber nodded at Irisviel's murmur. "That's not all. With four opponents present, we cannot make any careless moves."

In a regular battle royal, the most reliable tactic was to smash the quantitatively inferior with concentrated effort. Thus, if they were to show any weakness now, they might be forced toward the worst outcome—a hopeless four-against-one battle. Even Saber would not stand a chance. Which Heroic Spirit would start attacking which, and who would take that chance to make his move? To survive here, one had to see through the movements of the others; this applied to all Heroic Spirits.

Presently, Rider was not targeting anyone in particular. His current intention was probably to have a look at the Heroic Spirits participating in the Holy Grail War. But as one who knows no fear, he was the kind of man who would stand up to any challenge.

Archer clearly saw Rider and Saber as his enemies. The golden Heroic Spirit seemed ill-humored toward the two who called themselves the King of Conquerors and the King of Knights. His preferred target was likely the one who provoked him, Rider.

There was one problematic person left. Berserker. No one could figure out the black knight's intention in materializing right at this point. It added to the mayhem which none had control of. No prudent Master would think of pitching his Servant in the midst of this chaos.

Without a doubt, anyone would be just as wary of Berserker, with one exception: There was no doubt or hesitation in Archer's crimson eyes, only absolute anger and a murderous intent, barely held in as he looked down at Berserker. The black knight's disgusting stare was aimed only at him, standing on top of the street pole; the golden Heroic Spirit could clearly see that.

"You mad dog, do you expect pity from me?"

A low-life's gaze was as lowly and filthy as its existence. Being the target of such a gaze was an intolerable disgrace for a nobleman. To Archer, who laid claim to the title of King more staunchly than Rider did, Berserker's ill manners made him a complete criminal in his eyes. The treasured swords and spears around him changed in direction; the tips were now fully aimed at the new target, Berserker.

"You shall at least entertain me with your scattering, cur." A sword and a spear bustled in the air at the heartless verdict.

The weapons shot without warning from nowhere—this must be why the golden Heroic Spirit was of the Archer class. But this impromptu Noble Phantasm was too abnormal. The Noble Phantasm, which should normally be a treasure to the Heroic Spirit, was being pitched carelessly, the way one would casually throw a handful of stones. Still, the destructive power was enormous. The road surface seemed to be attacked by an explosive blast, and the scene was shrouded by the dust of asphalt being pulverized into tiny particles.

There was a collective gulp. In the thick dust, the shadow of a dark, tall figure wavered into their visibility. Berserker stood unharmed. He had merely moved from his starting point, where the road was now a crater. Of all the weapons thrown by Archer, only the spear had caused this, hitting its target after a slight delay. The sword that should have reached its target a little before the spear delivered no destruction—it was now in Berserker's hand.

How many had seen the swift offense and defense? At least, Irisviel and Waver could not understand what had just happened. The plain truth was that Berserker had effortlessly grabbed the precious sword, that first strike thrown by Archer, and with his newly acquired weapon, he had deflected the second strike, the precious spear.

"That bastard, is he really a Berserker?"

Rider howled a response to Lancer's strained murmur. "For someone who had forsaken his reason for madness, he's a remarkably skilled chap."

A Noble Phantasm was a weapon, reserved for exclusive usage by the Heroic Spirit who owned it. Any other Heroic Spirit who got a hold of it would not be able to handle it correctly. Whether by miracle or skill, it should be impossible to repel a consecutive strike so cleanly in a flash. Yet, not surprise but rage came to Archer. All kinds of facial expressions distorted his elegant face, frozen in a murderous frenzy.

"—How dare you touch my treasure with your filthy hand? Do you want to die that badly, you cur?!"

The air around Archer started dancing again. Like a halo, a majestic golden brilliance twirled in circles to reveal a flock of new Noble Phantasms—now sixteen of them. Not only spears and swords; there were now axes, hammers and halberds, even items of indefinite usage or origin, bladed weaponry with strange shapes. Every single one of them was polished like a mirror, and an enormous amount of prana flowed from each. None of them were any less than a divine mystery . . . They were indeed Noble Phantasms, without exception.

That's ... not possible ... . That was Waver's unspoken thought, and the other Masters and Heroic Spirits probably thought likewise.

A Heroic Spirit need not be limited to one Noble Phantasm. Sometimes, one could store three, or even four super weapons that qualify as such. But no one could have that many. Yet—here, Archer was throwing them one after the other as though he had an inexhaustible supply. And none of them were from the battle against Assassin the previous night.

"Let's see—how well this little compulsive thief can keep up!" At Archer's command, the flock of Noble Phantasms floating in the air were let loose, and rushed toward Berserker.

A thunderous roar shook the night air. A flash of light exploded through the sky. Who could believe that the throwing of swords and other similar weapons would wreak such destruction? A countless number of Noble Phantasms rained down on the warehouse district road, which looked like it had been carpet-bombed. Still, Archer's fierce attack did not stop. The Noble Phantasms, shot at Berserker with enough force to scatter anything away, fell like thunderbolts, striking again ... and again ... and again. The attack continued, even increasing in intensity —the target, Berserker, just would not fall.

Everyone was shocked. Even in a critical situation with a great number of enemies around, everyone shared the same thought. This was a repeat of the miracle from the first attack. Berserker just took the first halberd that came at him in his left hand, then swung the sword left and right in his right hand, repelling every single one of the subsequent Noble Phantasms away. The

technique was subtle and flawless. There was flair to it; even with a Noble Phantasm snatched from Archer, his handling was far from poor. He was swinging them around freely, like extensions of his arms; it looked like a demonstration of skills polished with favorite weapons he had specialized in for years. Offense and defense followed each other in course.

Unlike the other three Servants, the identities of the golden Archer and the dark Berserker were still mysteries. Saber and Lancer shuddered at this threat. If they were to advance in the Holy Grail War, they may have to cross arms with these two. But before these beasts which lay beyond the world of reason, just how should they ready themselves to stand up?

"—The golden one seems to be proud of the number of his Noble Phantasms, but the black guy has the worst affinity with him." The two Servants watched silently from the side, as the other one standing there, Rider, spoke confidently.

"Blackie grows stronger just by taking a weapon, and Goldie throws them so carelessly. He's a versatile fellow." Per the calm commentary from the King of Conquerors, Berserker did not retreat one step before Archer's fierce attack. On the contrary, when a more powerful Noble Phantasm flew at him, he would abandon his current one, exchanging it scrupulously with the new weapon. The violent roaring sound ceased when the last of the sixteen Noble Phantasms had fallen. In the hollow silence, only Berserker was left amid the settling dust. The surroundings, including the storehouses and street lights, were completely ruined. The black knight had a battle ax in his right hand and a simple sword in his left. All the other Noble Phantasms were

scattered at Berserker's feet or stuck in the rubble around him. Not a single blade had reached the black armor.

Berserker nonchalantly raised the two remaining Noble Phantasms in his hands and, without any preparation, he threw them in Archer's direction. Perhaps his aim was off, or he had not really tried to hit anything; the ax and the blade hit the pole of the street light that Archer was standing on. The blade hit in the middle, and the ax at the top, cutting the pole into pieces like a knife through butter. The pole, sliced into three pieces, fell to the ground with a tremor. It was the only thing to fall; the golden Heroic Spirit had jumped before the iron pole was cut into pieces, and landed on the ground apparently unscathed.

"Damn fool . . . . Are you trying to put me on the same ground as you? Someone like me who should be at the top?" He was unscathed only from a third party's point of view. Archer's rage had reached its critical limit. The wrinkles carved between his eyebrows transformed his good features into an evil omen.

"You deserve death for your insult. You cur, I won't leave a single piece of your body intact!"

In anger, Archer howled at Berserker, his eyes burning crimson. For the third time, the space around him warped to let a collection of blades materialize . . . The glowing Noble Phantasms now numbered thirty-two. This time, even Rider kept silent. Berserker had endured a continuous attack of sixteen Noble Phantasms, but there was no way one could resist twice that number. That went for all the other Servants as well. Nobody could estimate the limits of the golden Archer's latent power anymore.

"Gilgamesh is serious. He intends to open the Gate of Babylon even wider."

Tousaka Tokiomi held his head at Kotomine Kirei's comment coming from the jeweled communicator. The basement of the Tousaka mansion had none of the discomfort of the faraway warehouse district battlefield. Kirei, manipulating Assassin, was bringing results. The conditions were perfect. The only thing that had not been factored in the calculations was perhaps that the strongest Heroic Spirit, Gilgamesh, had appeared in the present time under the Archer class.

It was not an exaggeration to say that the defining characteristic of the Archer class was the strength of its Noble Phantasms. For Gilgamesh who owned an extraordinary one of EX-rank, it might have been inevitable. But ultimately, the Independent Action skill of the self-conceited King of Heroes was highly ranked, and that was the biggest miscalculation. Tokiomi respected the great prestige of the King of Heroes as much as he could, and as much as he deserved. But to think that his tolerance would be tested so much, and so early . . .

Gilgamesh must be the last to move. Right now, it was still Assassin's turn to act and gather information. Doing something as rash as exposing the Gate of Babylon again, and pitching all his strength against the mysterious Berserker—this could not be overlooked. To a Servant capable of Independent Action, who did not need to rely on the Master, the only way to give him orders was through the use of Command Spells. This granted one the right to give only three absolute orders. To make a Servant out of Gilgamesh, who did not have an ounce of respect for his Master,

they were all the more precious. *Always remain elegant*—this was a family precept handed down for generations in the Tousaka family. For him, who kept this motto closely, to be pressed into using a Command Spell before all the other Masters . . .

"Master, your decision?" Kirei urged with a hard voice from the other end of the communicator. Gritting his teeth, Tokiomi stared at the back of his right hand.

First staring at Berserker with a burning hatred, Archer slowly looked away, to the southeast. Over there was the hill of Miyama district and the high-class residential area. How many people could guess it was the direction of the Tousaka mansion?

"Do you think a sermon from someone like you can appease a king's anger? You're quite presumptuous, Tokiomi . . ." With a tone of abject annoyance, Archer spat in a suppressed voice. The glow of the countless Noble Phantasms around him disappeared at once, off to elsewhere.

". . . You dodged death by a hair, mad dog."

His resentment was barely reined in, but the flame of killing intent had already faded from his crimson eyes . With firm haughtiness, the golden Archer glared at the row of Servants.

"You curs. Cut down the mob next time. I will tolerate no less than a real hero." With this final careless remark, Archer canceled his materialization. The golden armor dematerialized and disappeared, leaving only an afterglow. The confrontation between the two knights, golden and dark, reached its conclusion in a way no one expected.

"Hmf. Apparently this guy's Master has even more of a hardy character than Archer himself."

Amazed, Rider exaggerated with a bitter smile. But everyone else figured it was no time for a careless remark. The Berserker who had matched Archer evenly was still standing in front of them. The eyes glowing widely in the slit of the helmet first wandered in the empty space, having lost their target . . . Then, finding new spoils, they were rekindled again. Now the target of that malice-colored glare, Saber felt a chill bustling through her spine.

". . . Ur . . ." The voice seemed to boil from the ground. Like a spell or curse, it was a moan full of hostility, hardly resembling human speech. This was the voice of Berserker, heard for the first time.

". . . Ar . . . Ur . . . h!"

Like a curse with a human shape, swelling from murderous intent, the black knight charged at the silver King of Knights.

– 153:50:22

P·ÛFIÛ is consumed not only to keep the Servant materialized, but also for even the least of their efforts. In battle, the rate of prana consumption is higher. This prana is extracted from the Master's Magic Circuits and supplied to the Servant. The activation of the Magic Circuits, in Matou Kariya's case, means hellish pain, as his body was eaten by the Crest worms. With the Servant dematerialized, prana consumption was at its minimum. Still, in that state, Kariya would sometimes be tortured with palpitations and dizziness. But with Berserker materialized, the agony was beyond imagination.

The foreign body awakened, eating his flesh and straining his bones. Acting as Kariya's pseudo Magic Circuits, the Crest worms supplied the extracted prana to Berserker without concern for the host's limits. That agony was not even the half of it. Being corroded, plundered by a living creature inside his body—the pain of being devoured alive was doubled by fear and disgust.

"Guh … Ga-gwa … hh!" Hiding in the darkness, Kariya stifled the scream of impending death that raked up his throat and chest. When his skin tore and blood started running, he started chewing off the fingernails on both hands. Worse still, the prana consumption rate of the Berserker class was higher than other Servants. When Zouken made Kariya use the maddening formula during the summoning to strengthen him, he was probably planning to tyrannize him in this way.

The worms bit at his spine. The worms were melting his nerves. The worms were nesting en masse inside Kariya's body. The worms are the worms are the worms are the worms the worms the worms the worms . . .

"Gaaaaahh . . ." He was unable to hold in his scream, but only a feeble moan came out; The intense pain was choking him, and the sound would not come out of his throat. As he started sobbing, Kariya kept trampling his body out of rage. He could not even watch over the fight between Archer and Berserker in the main street. When the tempest of pain finally calmed, it took Kariya some time before thought returned and he could grasp the situation.

". . . Haa . . . Haa . . ."

Raggedly exhaling the remains of his agony, Kariya resumed his observation of the battlefield through the vision of his familiar. There were three Servants left. Archer was nowhere to be seen. The battle had ended. He had not managed to achieve victory. Perhaps Tokiomi had evacuated Archer when he realized his disadvantage.

Before the overwhelming golden Archer, Kariya's Berserker had not taken even one step back. With magecraft improvised in a year, Kariya was able to rival Tousaka magecraft that had been polished for generations, all by himself.

Haggardly, Kariya left out a dry laugh at his theory. He did it. That haughty magus was finally splattered with mud by an ordinary man like Kariya, after always looking down at the likes of him. In his heart, Kariya sneered generously at Tokiomi and Zouken, thinking, *did you see that?*

I'm not a loser. Nobody will call me a failure or an insect anymore. I can fight against you. I'll have you know what fear is . . .

That was enough for tonight. There was no reason to continue a battle that would hurt him, now that his sworn enemy, Archer, had withdrawn. Just let the other Servants kill each other as they wish. At this conclusion, Kariya became the most panicked of them all when he saw Berserker take Saber as his new target and charge at her.

"Stop . . . Come back! Come back here, Berserker!"

He called out to him. Such a simple instruction should be enough to reach him, and yet the black knight did not respond. Instead, the amount of prana consumed by Berserker's excitation stimulated all the crest worms at once, and pain shot again through Kariya's body.

"Berserke—er! *Stop it!*"

With this round of pain, Kariya's voice was more like a scream. He did not even have the mental freedom to use a Command Spell anymore. Swarmed by a torrent of agony, Kariya could only focus entirely on keeping hold of his receding consciousness.

The black knight charged with the force of a wild beast, kicking at the asphalt. He looked only at Saber, swirling with black killing intent. Naturally, Saber was not unprepared. She immediately readied her sword in a defensive stance.

Like a ghastly drive creeping on the ground, Berserker swung his current weapon down at Saber's head. Saber blocked it safely

with her invisible sword, but she was astonished when she identified what the weapon was.

An iron pole—what was left of the street light pole Archer was standing on top of, which tumbled on the ground when Berserker chopped it down. Berserker probably picked it up at his feet when he charged at Saber. Holding the iron pole, over two meters long after being cut, with two hands like a spear, Berserker strained Saber's sword with terrifying pressure. But what surprised her most was that this weapon was nothing *but* an iron pole.

Saber's sword hidden under Invisible Air was definitely the holiest of the holy swords, the most supreme Noble Phantasm. There was no way it would have any trouble against a piece of metal picked up from the roadside. The only thing that could possibly match Saber's sword with such strength is the Noble Phantasm of another Heroic Spirit. Yet . . .

"Wh—at?" Holding up against the assault, Saber could not believe her eyes. The iron pole in Berserker's hands was being tainted black. Black lines spread from Berserker's two gauntlets, multiplying like the veins of a leaf and invading the iron pole, spreading through its entirety like a spider web. This was Berserker's prana—the prana muddled with bloodthirst and hatred, possessed only by the black knight. It permeated the iron pole from where he grasped it.

"You don't mean . . .?!" Saber understood through her surprise the true nature of this Berserker's Noble Phantasm. Lancer and Rider, watching closely, reached the same conclusion.

". . . So that's it. When Blacky takes something, it becomes his Noble Phantasm." Rider growled in admiration. The Noble

Phantasm of a Heroic Spirit did not need to manifest in a characteristic object. Sometime, it could be a type of Noble Phantasm that manifested itself through a unique ability retained by the Servant's very body. This was the case for Berserker.

Still, what an astonishing power it was. Berserker was capable of pillaging at will the countless Noble Phantasms thrown at him by Archer. They now understood the frightening lure. The instant Berserker's gauntlets grabbed one, control of Archer's Noble Phantasms went to the black knight. Not only that, even ordinary scrap iron filled with the immense prana became fitting competition for other Noble Phantasms once it came into Berserker's hands. Unlike the golden knight's numerous Noble Phantasms, Berserker's Noble Phantasm was endless.

The second blow, the third blow—Berserker pressed Saber back with impressive swings of his makeshift spears, while Saber only defended herself. Her left hand, resting on the hilt, had no strength in it, and the wound dealt by Lancer's Gáe Buidhe started to hurt again. With only her right hand wielding her sword, Saber could barely fight with the support of prana, but faced with torrential attacks from the furious Berserker she could only defend. Saber could not find a chance to retaliate, and gradually became disadvantaged.

"Saber . . .!" Irisviel called out eagerly. Unnoticed, drops of anxious sweat seeped from the King of Knight's brow.

Emiya Kiritsugu, from his distant surveillance, also saw that Saber was in a tight spot. But with his current equipment he could not interfere in a duel between Servants. If they could at least find out where Berserker's Master was located, there might be ways to

handle this . . . But Kiritsugu could not see Berserker's Master with any of his two night scopes.

". . . Maiya, can you see from your side?"

"No, I can't see him."

Kiritsugu furrowed his brows at Maiya's reply. Their positions were blind spots to each other. If they could not see the Master, it might be that Berserker's Master also considered his own hiding place as a priority, and did not stay at a position where he could deliver commands directly to his Servant. It seemed the opponent was more prudent than Archer's Master. For Kiritsugu, compared to talented but flippant magi, those who did not show themselves blatantly were much harder to handle.

"The situation does not look good . . ."

Right now, it involved more than just single combat between Berserker and Saber. Between the two stood Lancer and Rider, both still at full strength. On a battlefield where only the strongest survived, the worst position was to be at a clear disadvantage. The Masters of the other Servants must be thinking the same—at this point, by just helping Berserker a little, they could easily defeat Saber. Then they could eliminate the exhausted Berserker. It would be two birds with one stone. Lancer and Rider could defeat two enemies with minimal prana expenditure.

Kiritsugu sighted his rifle toward the top of the crane once again. The Assassin with the skull mask was still sitting there. Just one moment of carelessness might cost Kiritsugu his life.

". . . Damn." Kiritsugu gritted his teeth, but could only sit and wait.

The wound on Saber's finger cost her the maneuverability of her sword; Saber was keenly anxious because of that. Of course, she was aware of her danger. While she needed to stall Rider, who was observing at one side, Berserker's fight with her had also become a stalemate. In the current situation, she did not have any strength left to fight Berserker anymore.

Berserker, on the other hand, mercilessly and ferociously attacked, as befitting the Heroic Spirit of Fury. Although Berserker continued to throw his iron spear crudely like a beast, each throw was nonetheless skilfully accurate and precise.

It was not Berserker's vigor that pressed Saber down, but his intensely fierce barrage gave Saber no way to retaliate. No matter how bad the wound on her hand might be, the strongest Servant Saber did not even have a chance to strike back. On top of that, although Berserker's weapons were strengthened with prana, they were still the twisted remains of an iron pole.

Berserker was no mere mad dog. The Heroic Spirit that became Berserker was a master warrior with amazing skills that he still possessed even after his Mad Enhancement.

"You . . . Just who are you?!"

Of course, the black knight ignored Saber's question, but threw the iron pole with his piercing vigor. The strike was an absolutely exceptional feat. The ferocity of the strike appeared to hit Saber's short stature and—

However, the thrown pole did not hit Saber.The two meter iron pole was split down the middle, and fluttered from the air to the ground. It was Berserker's fake Noble Phantasm, strong enough to compete with Saber's holy sword. What broke this fake

Noble Phantasm with ease was a streak of red light that glimmered through the darkness.

Lancer had his back to the astonished King of Knights. The beautiful spearman took a pose, protecting Saber, the King of Knights, whom he regarded as an enemy only moments ago, and stood against Berserker.

"Please stop your pranks now, Berserker."

Lancer pointed at the black knight with the tip of the long spear in his right hand—Gáe Dearg, the Crimson Rose of Exorcism—and coldly declared war on the black knight. If Lancer's red spear could repel the prana of Berserker's Noble Phantasm, then the fake Noble Phantasms covered by Berserker's black prana would be nothing but bundles of iron.

"Saber has a previous engagement with me. If you keep up this nonsense and interrupt the battle between us, I won't stay quiet."

"Lancer . . ." Although this was a fight to the death, Saber was immensely touched by Lancer's words. The Heroic Spirit of the Spear devotedly believed in the same chivalry as she. Despite that, not everyone gathered on this battlefield praised Lancer's actions.

"What are you doing, Lancer? This is a good chance to defeat Saber."

A voice questioned severely. This displeased voice should be Lancer's Master. However, Lancer unexpectedly donned a solemn expression, unbefitting the Heroic Spirit.

"This fight with Saber is a battle that I, Diarmuid Ua Duibhne, gambled my honor on!" He yelled loudly at the empty sky.

"I'll first let you see how I will kill that mad dog. Therefore, my lord! This duel between Saber and I—"

"No." Mercilessly interrupting Lancer's passionate plea, Lancer's Master ordered with an even colder tone. "Lancer, assist Berserker in killing Saber. *I command you with the Command Seal.*"

The air on the battlefield froze with tension. The Command Seal: An absolute order for a Servant. No matter how great a Heroic Spirit might be, he could not disobey a Command Seal. Consequently, Lancer was no longer in possession of free will.

The tip of the red spear reversed direction and attacked, flying toward Saber with a low whistle. The two demonic spears, long and short, brushed past the shoulders of the rapidly retreating Saber one after the other in front of her face, sweeping across the sky. Lancer used the two spears in his left and right hand to attack the target directly behind him without even turning his head around. This astonishing prowess with the spears, as though the pair could change form at will, was a show of Lancer's true strength. The accuracy of Lancer's techniques did not even evoke his opponent's rebuke.

"Lancer . . .!" Saber, halfway through her sentence, suddenly went silent. Lancer turned around. Humiliation and anger filled his face with anguish; it spoke of the Heroic Spirit Diarmuid's thoughts more than any mighty argument ever could. For Lancer, whose body was bound by the Command Seal, his flesh no longer belonged to himself. It was merely a cruel and merciless machine called a Servant. All the skills and abilities the Heroic Spirit Diarmuid had gained were manipulated wantonly without regard for his own beliefs, used only to fulfill the Master's supreme

command. As a Heroic Spirit, Saber deeply understood Lancer's regret.

Beside Lancer, Berserker was closing in step by step. Although the situation had changed on the battlefield, Berserker's goal apparently was still Saber. Berserker picked up the iron pole that was cleaved in half by Lancer's red spear, and this time he held it at eye level like a longsword. Although the shape of the Noble Phantasm had changed, there were no inconveniences to his use of it.

Saber was out of options. If her left hand had not been injured, she might have been able to fight her way out of this. But now, Saber was at the limit of her abilities just handling Berserker alone. At the moment, with Lancer as her enemy as well, Saber had no chance of emerging victorious.

"... Saber ... I'm sorry ..." Lancer moaned painfully, but continued to advance toward Saber step by step. Contrary to his expression of shame, the quivering prana of the two spears left and right, hiding their killing intent, were raised in a haze.

The black knight beside Lancer remained silent as ever, but the intensity of his threatening surge increased exponentially, advancing toward Saber. A thick layer of black veins covered the fragment of the iron pole, turning it into something beyond a sword, alien and repulsive, and the tip of the splint was pointed intimidatingly at Saber. Saber stared calmly and intensely at those Noble Phantasms, gave a sidelong glance at Irisviel, and caught her gaze.

"Irisviel, I will handle the situation. During that time—"

Saber's thoughts were already running in circles. There was only one desperate measure left. She could do only this in such a grave situation. No matter how big a sign of defeat she was showing right now, she must protect Irisviel. Even if she was to lose her own life . . .

"During that time, I need to get you out of danger. Run as far as you can." Saber nonchalantly reported this quick decision to Irisviel, but Irisviel did not decipher Saber's true intention. The proud maiden knight would cleave a path for Irisviel to survive at the expense of her own life. Irisviel shook her head decisively. She did not expect Saber to sacrifice herself in even the smallest of ways.

"Irisviel! No matter what happens, you must—"

"Rest assured Saber. Believe in your Master."

Saber recognized the deeper meaning hidden in the sentence, but she was still very puzzled.

Kiritsugu—Is he here?

Actually, Irisviel did not help with Saber's confusion, but she had always believed firmly in Kiritsugu. At this point, Saber and she had not done anything wrongly. Per Kiritsugu's orders, they had fought honorably, making a big show in the open. Now Saber was the focus of the battlefield. Everyone regarded this delicate knight as a thorn by their side.

The two spears of exorcism and mortality and the iron soaked through with the black aura of the kill failed to threaten Irisviel. All this was proceeding as Kiritsugu had planned. That is—Saber and Irisviel should now be at an advantage.

Therefore—the rest is up to you, dear. Turning to her husband who was nowhere to be seen, Irisviel prayed with total conviction.

Emiya Kiritsugu made a decision to act, not because he detected his wife's worries, but from a clear analysis of the situation. The first to be protected was the Vessel of the Grail, Irisviel. Since Saber could no longer protect her Master, right now no hesitation could be afforded.

"... Maiya. Match my countdown and attack Assassin. Restrain him."

"Understood." The answer from the radio was immediate. The air was soaked with tension. At this point, they had to kill Lancer's Master. It was the only way.

"—Six."

Kiritsugu began to count in a low voice, and focused the heat-vision scope toward Lancer's Master.

After customization, the WA2000 sniper rifle was tested outside the country before it came into Japan; Kiritsugu was already familiar with the gun's characteristics. However, he had not tested its compatibility with the night scope system. At this point, he could only rely on Maiya's skill.

"—Five."

According to Maiya's report, the shooting range had been adjusted to 500M. The reticule in the scope should be identical to the bullet's flight path, from the muzzle out to 500M. In long-distance shooting, the bullet does not travel in a straight line, but in a shallow parabola. That is, when the target is closer than the shooting distance, the bullet's actual landing point is a bit off from

the point of aim, a bit lower. Lancer's Master was less than 300M away. Kiritsugu carefully adjusted the aim.

"—Four."

Lancer was forced to attack Saber because of his Master's Command Seal. After his Master was shot dead, his reactions may be unpredictable, but he would probably stop attacking Saber. Then the only direct threat would be the lone Berserker. Kiritsugu would come up with an idea to get Saber and Irisviel out of danger.

The last problem was Kiritsugu's own safety. Under such a situation, he had no other choice but to resort to bold actions, such as firing right next to Assassin.

"—Three."

To reduce the risk, Kiritsugu timed his shots to Maiya's. Her AUG fired a 5.56MM Remington high-velocity cartridge. Its power would not damage Assassin. However, if Assassin came under sudden fire, he might ignore the other sniper in front of him—it goes without saying that the preparations were severely deficient.

"—Two."

Assassin might mistakenly take Maiya, who was only pretending to attack, as his enemy. However, Maiya's position was far enough from Assassin for her to escape. Perhaps, out of fear of showing himself in front of other Masters, Assassin would have left before that point. However, in this already unexpected situation , Assassin might immediately assault Kiritsugu, who was right beside him. At that point, they could only fight on and hope for the best. In the first place, this had nothing to do with winning. It was the only way.

"—One."

Kiritsugu breathed quietly and slowly pulled the trigger. The Walther's muzzle was completely still; the hollow barrel was like a killing glare that locked its gaze onto the target. At this moment, a deafening rumble reverberated. That loud sound was not Maiya's AUG firing full-auto, and was obviously not Kiritsugu's shot, either. It was not the characteristic report of rifle fire, but an impact strong enough to shake the earth. It was a thunderbolt that suddenly visited the battlefield. It had a dizzying flash of lightning that contrived to turn night into day, and a roar that boomed greater than any thunder.

"Aaalalalalalalaie!"

The lightning did not descend from the sky, but traversed across the ground. No—that thing that looked like lightning was the galloping chariot entangled by escaping electricity.

Lancer quickly flipped backwards and avoided the chariot in time. But Berserker, who kept all his attention of Saber, did not even have time to turn around and register what was happening. Accompanying Rider's war cry, the two divine bulls first kicked the black knight to the ground with their four front hooves, and then trampled the black knight mercilessly with their four hind hooves. Each hoof was enveloped with rolling purple lightning; just one kick would have been a very heavy hit. The divine bulls trampled upon Berserker eight times in all; his wounds must have been fatal. After Rider's chariot roared past, Berserker did not even have the strength to stand. The figure with the black armor lay face up on the ground.

Rider sat on the stopped chariot and gazed down at his utterly defeated enemy. His spirited face was covered with smiles.

"—Oh? What happened to you, one with such a backbone?"

Berserker was not dead yet. His body twitched feebly, and he slowly rose up from the ground. The black knight, stomped upon by the divine bulls, finally managed to turn his body around and crawl away from the chariot's path. He had noticed Rider, and luckily avoided the decisive maximum impact of the chariot wheels.

Rider's Noble Phantasm sped across in front of Saber. Upon seeing the Noble Phantasm's overwhelming power of destruction, Saber was speechless. Gordius Wheel—its power obviously lay not in one-on-one fighting, but against armies. Even the gallop just then had been carefully calibrated by Rider. Had Rider wished it, even Saber, much less Lancer, would have fallen prey to those hooves and wheels.

The recumbent Berserker stretched out his leg weakly in an attempt to stand, but he had suffered a heavy impact and seemed to have realized that he could not keep up the fight. As he carefully stopped moving, his outline turned fuzzy, dissipating like thin mist. He canceled his physical form, returning to spiritual form, and escaped in this fashion.

"Under such conditions, I can only ask Blacky to remove himself—"

Standing on his chariot, Rider appeared as if nothing has happened. He called out with his face toward the sky and his robust neck bent.

"Master of Lancer. Although I do not know where you are hiding, you have disgraced a battle between knights by despicable means. This is unbefitting of a magus's opponent." At this point, the stalwart Servant smiled savagely, threatening the invisible enemy.

"Have Lancer retreat. If you still insist in humiliating him further, then I will join Saber and the two of us will defeat your Servant. How about that?"

The anger of the hidden magus could be felt throughout the battlefield. But he did not hesitate. "—Retreat, Lancer. That is enough for tonight."

Upon hearing the command Lancer heaved a sigh of relief and lowered the spear in his hand. "Many thanks, King of Conquerors."

When he heard the whispered thanks of the handsome spearman, Rider gave a satisfied smile. "That's nothing. A show of affection is a beautiful thing on the battlefield."

Lancer once again expressed gratitude toward Rider with his gaze, then he nodded toward Saber. There was no need for words. They had confirmed the oath between them. Saber also nodded toward Lancer. The duel would continue another time. With this confirmation, Lancer returned to spiritual form and disappeared.

The destructive storm now blown over the battlefield, silence arrived in due course. Soon after, as though suddenly remembered, the sound of the waves smashing against the cliff and the bustle of faraway streets crept back into the night sky. Lancer's Master must have released the barrier that was cast in the neighboring area.

Saber gazed at the last person standing on the battlefield, Rider, with complicated feelings.

"... So, why did you come here, King of Conquerors?"

"Ah. I've never considered that properly." Faced with Saber's inquiry, the stalwart Servant shrugged nonchalantly, as though it did not concern him. "Things like reasons and plans, such bothersome trivialities, should be left to future historians to give me. Heroes like us only need to obey our hearts' desire, and gallop through the battlefield with our boiling blood."

"... That is something only a king can say." Saber's disappointed reply was adamant. She believed in the chaste way of knights, a world set apart from the barbaric principles Rider used to justify his actions.

"Oh? Are you saying my way of kingship is alien to you? Hmph, that is only natural." Rider snorted, and ignored Saber's defiant glare. "All ways of kingship are unique. For I, a king, am as incompatible with you, also a king, as fire is to water. You are trying to split this world into black and white."

"That is my desire. This day, on this ground, I too will—"

"Enough, enough, rest that vigor for now." Rider gave a small smile and pointed at Saber's left hand. "I, Alexander, will not take advantage of your weakness as others would. Saber, fulfill your promise with Lancer first. Then I will duel with Lancer or you, whoever might be the victor in that battle."

Saber was about to rebuke, but her left thumb was too much of a handicap before Rider. It would not do to underestimate the battle prowess of this Heroic Spirit, who defeated Berserker in one blow.

"Then, King of Knights, we are going to part ways for now. The next time we meet, I will incite all of my hot blood into fighting you. Little master, have you anything to command?"

The youth who lay on the steering platform beside Rider's feet did not respond. Rider grabbed his collar and heaved him up, but the short little Master's eyes were rolled back; he had already fainted. It seemed Rider's display of power was too strong when he attacked Berserker by surprise.

"... This one needs to learn how to be unwavering." Rider sighed, placing his Master into his own arms, then tightened the reins of his two divine bulls. The bulls brayed, emitted thunder, and beamed rays of lightning from their hooves as they soared into the sky.

"Farewell!" Accompanied by the roaring thunder, Rider's chariot galloped into the southern sky.

Irisviel finally disentangled herself from tension and released the breath she was holding. When she looked about her, all she could see was a scene of total devastation. That was to be expected—five Servants were gathered at one place, and some of them had unreservedly released their Noble Phantasms, destroying at will.

"The first battle was already conducted with such intensity. Had there ever been a Holy Grail War like this before?"

Irisviel was not worried about the traces of destruction. The Holy Church's supervisor was responsible for the secrecy of the war. The place looked like it had experienced an earthquake. The supervisor must organize those employed by the Church and carefully mend the area.

Saber was still silent, staring at the sky that Rider flew past. Her delicate silhouette, showing no sign of excitement or exhaustion from the savage battle, stood sternly and soundlessly on the battlefield. That figure of the girl clad in armor was like a painting, an image of beauty that allowed no violation. But Irisviel did not mirror Saber's calm demeanor; she knew Saber had taken a major injury.

"Saber, your left arm—"

"Yes. The hand hurts too much; what a disgrace. As Rider had said, if I do not end my duel with Lancer and remove the curse of this wound, it will interfere with my battles against other Servants."

Irisviel did not detect any unease in the King of Knight's indifferent tone. Saber's resolution consoled Irisviel.

"... Thank you, Saber. My life was saved because of you."

Irisviel lowered her head. Saber replied with a smile.

"I fight at the front line to protect you behind me, Irisviel."

Irisviel once again felt it with a pang—Saber's strength, courage, and gentleness. Over a dozen years younger, she had the stature of a girl, not yet a woman. ... Such a delicate figure, such slender wrists, but she was a true knight, a hero.

"The war has only just begun, Irisviel. Tonight's battle is only the first night of the beginning of war."

"... Yes."

"They are all strong enemies of equal might. Heroes invited from different eras ... None of them can be easily disposed of."

There was no anxiety or fear in Saber's voice. Facing the coming storm, the warrior's heart was both excited and calm. The

soaring spirit and boiling blood would not change in any era, any world. That was the true testimony of a hero's soul. The girl stared at the southern sky and proclaimed calmly.

"This is . . . the war of the Holy Grail."

– 153:41:36

A black curtain was drawn across this space. Not empty darkness, but viscous and condensed. Like fetid decaying matter, this darkness surpassed the limit of black. The dense, nauseating smell of blood was all over the place. The weak moans and cries that could be heard everywhere created a terrifying atmosphere. The curtain of darkness that sealed all sight could well have been a screen of mercy.

In such a darkness, a sphere shone with a white light, like the full moon viewed from beneath the water surface. It was a crystal globe the size of a tennis ball. The translucent, faint glow came from the images floating within it.

Rubble piled like mountains; a desolate nightscape. Yet this scenario was not present at the beginning. The current image of complete destruction was not present twenty minutes ago; it was emptiness then. Behind its back, the crystal ball projected and recorded every detail.

The two VIPs saw all of the fighting. The crystal ball's dim light illuminated the faces of the pair, as both visages expressed unusual joy at the sight of destruction.

"Impressive! Truly impressive!"

A happy demonic killer who had stepped into this extraordinary world with astronomical rarity—Uryuu Ryuunosuke. His slanted eyes sparkled with a childishly innocent smile, and he began to cheer.

"Sir Bluebeard, everything that happened was real, right? Awesome! This isn't just some video game platform!"

Since signing a contract with the Servant Caster by sheer chance, Ryuunosuke had turned from his daily routine, becoming ever more strange. He greedily sought excitement and pleasurable entertainment, treating the battle that had just happened as a supreme entertainment feast.

"So, this is Heaven's Feel? Sir, will you participate in this battle as well? Will you, Sir, fly through the air with brilliance like the people we just saw?"

Caster did not respond, but stared at the crystal ball passionately. Within the nightscape displayed in the crystal stood a petite figure. As though possessed by a ghost, Caster gaped blankly at her silhouette.

Since he started monitoring the battle in the warehouse district, Caster had been in that intense state. He paid no attention to Ryuunosuke's excitement, nor did he care about the other Heroic Spirits, instead staring only at one person. Sterling silvery armor covered her fair and slender body; beautiful blonde hair flew like golden sand—the young woman, a Saber-class Heroic Spirit invited from among the seven Servants. Her body was most petite, yet she was the bravest and most majestic. No matter what sort of trouble she was forced into, she showed no fear, firmly confronting her opponents. Caster could not move his sight from Saber. That reminiscent, faraway figure, an aura of nobility emanating from her profile, was precisely the illusion that Caster had toiled for across time.

"... Sir?"

Ryuunosuke saw the face of Caster, who had been silent from the beginning, and lapsed into silence himself. It was then he noticed that the gaunt, pallid face was stained by tears of pure elation.

"... It has come true." Caster, overcame with excitement, whispered gently. "... Everything has come true. I once thought ... it was impossible. Yet the Grail is truly all-powerful ..."

"It has come true? What, what?"

What? It was a question Ryuunosuke had to ask. Caster's exulted expression meant that something extraordinary had happened; though the reason for it left him puzzled even after deep thought.

"The Grail chose me!" It was as though Caster could not see the inquiring look in his master's eyes. He grabbed Ryuunosuke's hand and shook it fervently, wishing to share with him his happiness.

"Without having to battle, we have already obtained victory. Yes. The Grail is already in our hands."

"Yet I ... I have not seen, nor have I touched this supposed Grail!"

"That is not the point." Caster declared as his eyes widened and he pointed at the young woman reflected in the crystal ball. "Do you see that? She told me. That august expression, her divine figure ... It must be *her*, the one destined to change my fate!"

Ryuunosuke furrowed his brows, studying the figure in the crystal ball. The person clad in armor appropriate for the era, whether a young man or woman, possessed a rare beauty, enough to rival Caster in modern Japan.

"... Do you know her?"

"I know her. She is my light; She guided me forth; She gave me life. She is the purpose of my very existence ..." Caster, choked with emotions, covered his head in his hands and continued. "She was once abandoned by God; annihilated in disgrace. But now she has been resurrected. It is a miracle! It was my faithful wishes that allowed her to be reborn!"

Ryuunosuke had no idea what was going on, but he could understand the man whom he admired—Bluebeard—and his current state of delight. Although they had not been together very long, Bluebeard could always come up with impressive ideas even when in great distress. A new challenger to the world, a murderer—the strange man whom Ryuunosuke worshiped was a sadistic artist. Therefore, to Ryuunosuke, Caster's happiness—whatever its cause—must be a good thing and certainly worth anticipating.

"For some strange reason, I'm beginning to get excited as well, Sir Bluebeard."

"Yes! Yes!" Caster shook his hair loose as he both wept and cried. He clasped the crystal tightly with both hands as he pressed his forehead against its icy surface, his frenzied eyes staring at the young woman's face.

"Oh ... Maiden, my holy chaste virgin ... I will be with you soon. Whatever happens, please wait for me ..."

The wet, snake-like smile lingered in the darkness.

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Having watched the story unfold, Kirei Kotomine ordered Assassin to return, and dispelled his shared perception. As the smell of sea winds and the battlefield senses diminished, he returned to the basement of the church.

Risei Kotomine appeared from nowhere, standing beside Kirei, as though listening to Kirei report to Tokiomi about the battle. As soon as the battle ended, Kirei assumed his position as regulator, rapidly giving orders with his cellphone.

"... Mion district. Yes, the streets and warehouses next to the sea. Massive damage ... Ah, ah. All right. Mobilize the city rangers to clean up the battlefield ... Follow Plan D ... I'll be depending on you for on-site identification ..."

They had previously made arrangements with the police and the local government. Perhaps a report on the tragic scene of the warehouses—completely distorted and ambiguous—would be published in tomorrow's morning paper . Eyeing his father, Kirei began his analysis of the people who had appeared in that night's battle.

Clock Tower's elite magus, El-Melloi had lost Alexander's artifact, which he once possessed. Tokiomi's spy had also once reported this. Alexander entered the Grail war as a rider-class Servant, and his young Master seemed to be mysteriously related to Lancer's Master. But there was no doubt that Lancer's Master was El-Melloi. After Alexander's artifact had been stolen by a young man named Waver, he must have obtained the Heroic Spirit Diarmuid's artifact.

When Matou summoned Berserker, Zouken had reported the event to his father. At the moment, neither Kirei nor Tokiomi

paid much attention to it. However, they had not anticipated Servant Berserker's immense powers, nor his exceptional ability of harnessing his opponent's Noble Phantasm. He was a natural opponent for Tokiomi's Gilgamesh. For the battle to swing in Tokiomi's favor, the other Servants must first defeat Berserker. This task would be best accomplished by Lancer. Diarmund's Noble Phantasm, Crimson Rose of Exorcism was the best artifact to nullify Berserker.

Caster and his Master remained a riddle, since they had not appeared yet. Considering Caster's class, this was unsurprising. Apart from Berserker, all the other Servants had already exposed their true names. In addition, the major threats, Saber and Berserker, had also lost their respective battles; especially Saber, whose wound would greatly affect her later matches. Gilgamesh displayed his Noble Phantasms with great fanfare and placed himself at a disadvantage, yet he did not expose his true name. Also, no one had noticed that Assassin was still alive. Judging from the situation, Tokiomi was still at a great advantage.

Kirei calmly calculated as he organized, but there was not one shred of excitement in his heart. In accordance with the wishes of the church, Tokiomi Tousaka was to obtain the ultimate victory. Kirei's mission was to help Tokiomi achieve that goal. He did not see many obstacles to it. It was a mission without any real anticipation. It was also a conclusion of the past three years.

"... Master Kirei."

Kirei tensed. A shadow silently slipped beside him. It was a woman wearing a skull mask, dressed entirely in black; Assassin, responsible for reconnaissance near the warehouse district.

"... What is it?"

"I have located something strange outside the church." Assassin respectfully handed over the corpse of a bat. Though the head had been twisted and broken, it was slightly warm, suggesting that it had not died long.

"A familiar?"

"Yes. Though found outside the bounded field, it is obvious that it was placed there to monitor the church."

Assassin's conclusion defied belief. The church was neutral in the Grail War and not to be challenged. If a Master dared to interfere in the affairs of the church, the regulator could choose to punish him or her by removing Command Seals, or suspending the privilege of battle. There was no reason to go to such great risk to monitor the church. Unless—The story that Kirei had lost Assassin and was now under the protection of the church ... Was a Master already doubting the validity of that observation?

He picked up the corpse of the bat from Assassin's hand. Kirei fixed his sight on a stranger object; taped on the stomach of the bat were small electronic parts. A button-sized battery and ... seemingly a miniature wireless CCD camera. If the bat was a magus's familiar, it would be a strange combination indeed. Kirei knew that most magi scorned and neglected worldly technologies. His teacher right now, Tokiomi, was one such man. This magus, on the other hand, used not only magical sight, but also machines, to record everything. This was not something a normal magus would even consider.

"... Completely indiscriminating in his methods. Completely ignorant of a magus's pride ..." Like a lightning bolt, Tokiomi's

words flashed in Kirei Kotomine's mind as he remembered his mentor's words. Kirei could not deduce which magus did this, or why he might have done this. He stared at the body of the little animal for a long time. In his heart, the answer to this riddle was more meaningful than the night's battle between five Servants.

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Lift the iron top of the entrance, move it aside—such simple affairs took almost an hour. To the haggard Kariya Matou, it was tenuous work even with all his strength put into it.

At last, Kariya managed to pry open a crack, sliding the lid aside. Refreshing air flowed into the disgusting sewers. Kariya was invigorated in this short moment. Exerting all of his strength, he pushed the manhole cover aside and slowly crawled up like a caterpillar. There was not a single person on the streets. In the silence of the night, no one noticed Kariya's shadow. It was the same street that the Servants had battled on, only three streets away from the four lane road.

Kariya was different from the other magi. He was only a skimmer magus—lacking the formal training and learning of a real magus, he was like a student who only went to cram school. Unlike the others, he did not share the same arrogance or carelessness. On the other hand, however, he did not have the same confidence when confronting other magi. Adding to this the fact that his Servant was Berserker . . . Even if he wanted to command Berserker at his side, Berserker would never listen to his commands. Thus, it was probably better to allow Berserker to

wildly lob bombs at his opponents. Let him rage. Kariya decided to first protect himself as he observed the events from a safe location.

Kariya detected the scent of Lancer as he chased the Heroic Spirit to that location. As the battle began, he decided to not expose himself. Sending out sight worms obtained from Zouken, he hid in the sewers and observed the battle from underground.

Trying for a long time to stabilize his breathing, Kariya collapsed on his back on the freezing asphalt. Blood covered his body. Most of his capillaries had exploded, and blood oozed continuously from cracks in his skin. A long time ago, Kariya had seen the victim of a nuclear plant explosion struggle against disease. Right now, his appearance and situation was no different from the victim's prior to his death. His body of flesh had already been destroyed. But there were Crest worms spread across Kariya's body. Their magic extended his lifespan and allowed him to wriggle.

Kariya could not believe his body had been reduced to this state. When he supplied prana to Berserker, it felt like the worms had already devoured his entire body. Merely one battle and he had been reduced to this. The backlash and burden of controlling Berserker was far beyond what Kariya could handle. In addition, Berserker was completely ignorant of Kariya's orders—he was like a bloodthirsty beast.

Once unleashed, Berserker would butcher everything he sees, not stopping until all his prana was spent. If the battle had continued for much longer, all would have been lost. Kariya would be drained to a dry husk by the worms as he supplied more prana —more than his body would ever be able to handle. To Kariya,

the battle among Servants was truly risky. If he could not endure at his limits and stop Berserker, the only thing awaiting him was his own destruction.

"... Aaaah ...?"

Kariya thought about the various aspects of battle. He sighed deeply and could not help but think that the future was grim. There was still a long way to go to Tokiomi Tousaka's defeat, As for defeating everyone else and obtaining the Grail, that future was even further away.

Yet to save Sakura, he had to overcome all these obstacles. He had only to push on. He could not fall. Even if it cost him every last drop of his blood and every inch of his flesh, Kariya Matou must reach that distant shore. If he could not succeed, all meaning would be lost. Kariya forced his terribly weakened body to rise as he stood up unsteadily. He could not lay in slumber here forever.

Berserker had been hit by Rider's Noble Phantasm, and the damage was enormous. Without question, it would take a great amount of time for Berserker to fully heal. And prana—the prana Berserker required to repair his body could only be obtained from the worms in Kariya's body.

Kariya needed rest. He leaned against the wall. His body, incapable of standing alone, struggled, his wavering gait disappearing into the night.

~Volume 1 end ~

Postface

Urobuchi Gen

Urobuchi Gen wants to write stories that can warm hearts.

Those who know about my creative history would probably furrow their brows and think this is a cold joke. Actually, I cannot completely believe it, either. Because when I start typing out words on the keyboard, the stories my brain comes up with are always full of madness and despair.

In fact, I was not like this before. I often wrote pieces that did not have a perfect ending, but by the last chapter the protagonist would still possess a belief that "Although there will be many hardships to come, I still have to hold on."

But I do not know when it started; I could no longer write works like this.

I am full of hatred toward people's so-called happiness, and had to push the characters I poured my heart out to create into the abyss of tragedy.

All things in the world, if left alone and paid no attention, are bound to advance in a negative direction. Likewise, no matter

what we do, we cannot stop the universe from getting colder. It is a world created by a series of "progresses of common sense"; it can never escape the bondage of its physical laws.

Therefore, in order to write a perfect ending for a story you have to twist the laws of cause and effect, reverse black and white, and even possess a power to move against universal rules. Only a heavenly and chaste soul which can sing carols of praise to humanity can save the story. Writing a story with a perfect ending is a double challenge to the author's body and soul.

Urobuchi Gen has lost that power. It still has not recovered. The "tragedy syndrome" is still continuing within me. Is this a terminal disease? Should I give up on the pure "warrior of love" that I've longed for? Ascend a pallid battle steed and reincarnate into a dispenser of this virus . . . Could it be that I can only create pieces that give men courage and hope in my next life? (When I wrote this, I wrote "courage" as "lingering ghosts." Could this be because of using "ime"—Ah, I wrote "ime" as "hatred"; is there no chance of recovery for me?)

Honestly, I even wanted to break my pen. I remember watching *Spiderman 2*. When I saw Peter wishing that he did not have the power to change his body, I also thought *"Perhaps, I wish to never write another script again!"*

Therefore, I visited my friend Nasu Kinoko's house on the afternoon of the next day, and wanted to tell him my true intentions. But before I spoke with him about what I've been thinking in my heart, Takashi Takeuchi got ahead of me and started talking. And as soon as he spoke, he brought up a proposal that was unthought of.

The parts afterward are the same as Kinoko's notes. Although the initial plan was just a short piece describing the duel between Kiritsugu and Kirei, the wings of imagination, once spread, cannot be stopped, and finally all seven Masters and their Servants were gathered. I found myself once again immersed in the joy of weaving a story. It can be said that the launch of *Fate/Zero* saved my writing career.

Right now, I am writing a piece that had been saved, and had a perfect ending. More accurately, I am writing a part of this piece. Yes. This marvelous piece called *Fate*—its perfect united ending surrounding the protagonist Emiya Shiro is a set fact. No matter how cruel the end of Zero turns out to be, it would not affect the perfect finish of this entire work.

Right now, I finally have a chance to write a tragic ending according to my heart's desire. No matter how I display the darkness inside my heart, in the bigger picture I am nevertheless a partner of "the warrior of love, Nasu Kinoko."

Ohhh yeah.

Umm. Although it did not completely solve my problem, allowing me to once again discover "the self with the joy of creation" was already a big improvement.

Right now, I am moving forward step by step. No matter where I end up in the future, I am very happy at the moment.

According to current projections, *Fate/Zero* should end in four volumes.

Nasu Kinoko

In the world of sorcery, a miracle exists that fulfills any wish. This vessel is called the Holy Grail, and in order to complete it, all its rituals must be conducted.

Up till now, examples demonstrating this "mystery" have yet to be seen. But ever since the Holy Grail was born, countless days and lives have already wafted away before it. It has only been two hundred years since then.

Fuyuki's ritual is still quite young. To ensure the ritual's success, many talented individuals are needed to build the foundations. Therefore, seven magi and seven Servants are gathered. The summoned ones gathered here are all nobles harnessing truths beyond the ordinary.

If you regard surpassing them as your goal, then come and prove yourself the strongest—

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

A miracle will only happen to one person, and it is exactly because of this uniqueness that miracles hold such values. That was ten years back, in the time of the game *Fate/Stay Night*.

Here, the curtains are lifted on another *Fate* made by Urobuchi Gen. This is *Zero*. A Heaven's Feel that no one has seen. A story about *that man* whom no one had ever mentioned. A magnificent prologue.

. . . Wait, I originally wanted to get some fame with *Zero*'s brilliance too. But I gave up when I thought the piece could not be too long.

Urobuchi Gen is a man distinguished in both sword and pen, who has a calm and thorough objectivity as well as an elegance with words. The swiftness of his sword could overcome the speed of sound. Also, his ability to control the entire story is of the best quality in the PC game world, and he has created many outstanding works up till now. He is already an assassin or half-vampire. Will probably be a cannibal next. His motto is "hum, this is pretty tasty." He even thinks of himself as one of the great men of the time.

Firstly, I would like to express here my joy at having him adapt my work. A new *Fate* painted by his hand. I, as the original author, was more deeply moved by its charm than anyone else.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

This book talks about the story of the fourth Heaven's Feel.

The rules in the *Fate* version of Heaven's Feel are actually rather simple.

1 A battle royal between seven mages and their Servants, acting as familiars.
2 Servants are materialized in Heroic Spirit form, according to an appearance "befitting the era."
3 The Master has three absolute commands over the Servant.
4 The final survivor wins the right to possess the Holy Grail.

That's how it is. There are other details—branches and leaves—but their rules will be established as long as the root and trunk of the tree exist. In fact, it is very simple and basic. Because of that, the kind of story created is completely dependent on the creator's outrageous imagination. It can be a cruel boy-meets-girl, or a vigorous tangled battle.

Fate/Stay Night belongs to the former. What about *Zero*? Of course, I don't need to talk about Urobuchi Gen's true nature. It will definitely be an utterly confused war of communal slaughter.

Those readers who thought *Fate/Stay Night* "should have more than blood, tears and tragic endings," this is for you! This is the true Heaven's Feel, with the battle for survival as its essence! This is Emiya Kiritsugu's other side that was never mentioned until now, unknown to others. This is the fourth Heaven's Feel that had never been completely described until now. Be they the magi on the stage or their Servants; they are all boss-level characters, and between them a cruel and merciless battle of elimination will be conducted.

Yes. *Zero* is canon, but at the same time it is a different legend from *Fate/Stay Night*. To define it, it is an extra part spun out of the canon story. It is a unique leaf of a melody that Urobuchi Gen conducted from a completely *Fate*-ish trunk. Here, you do not have to consider the content of the *Fate/Stay Night* game. Only move the story according to your wishes, let the characters shown portray themselves to the fullest, and rush toward the ending without regret.

That kind of galloping sentiment. I really want to reminisce about the contract interwoven with hope and despair, and wait for the duel between Emiya Kiritsugu and *that man* in his destiny at the same time.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The marvelous conclusion of the Volume 1 postface follows. Let me talk about behind-the-scene stories that everyone is interested in.

Why would *Zero* be written by Urobuchi Gen? That is a long story. The relationship between Urobuchi Gen and *Fate* goes back to 2002.

I was writing the *Fate* Saber route at the time, and was sent into the hospital near my house due to illness. TYPE-MOON was still doujin at the time, and *Fate* was yet a fledgling draft with four main routes including an Ilya route. Takeuchi, who thought "if only Nasu is doing the work, we'll never finish it," asked me: "Is there a writer you find trustworthy, who can write some stories to be inserted into plot?"

With such thoughts, I began to hook Urobuchi Gen with baits such as "wanna go see a movie together?" Although I was quite happy with Urobuchi's reply "I'll definitely do things that interest me," I still told him "Nah, I was just kidding!." That was because I suddenly realized I always gave up on projects by being like this, and I must see this one through. Maybe *Fate* will be the last game that is written solely by me. Therefore I decided to do it myself, and gave up on the plan of seeking his help.

(Later, TYPE-MOON went commercial, therefore ordering Urobuchi's scripts became harder. He was also busy doing other things he likes, so the matter of cooperation was put away.)

Then two years passed. It was now the summer of 2004, when *Hollow* was being developed. When we were developing *Hollow*, which had many assistant writers creating the plot together, Takeuchi once again surprised me with his words.

"For *Eclipse*, should we get Urobuchi Gen to write one?" It was too surprising. But because my disposition as Urobuchi's fan was too intense, it was too hard for me to speak such a request; it was like making a demand to a god. I gave the question to Takeuchi in a roundabout way: ". . . Um, if it's brought up by you, Takeuchi, he might find it pretty hard to refuse . . . ." Therefore, at one time when we were dining with Urobuchi, Takeuchi said in straightforward fashion, "Urobuchi-san, I've got something I want to talk to you about." That was such a strong direct attack!! As ferocious as a spiral upward hook.

Yes. Spiral upward hook. I think those knowledgeable readers should know about it. Faced with such an attack, this man who

often surpassed the reader's imagination only hummed and nodded slightly, and made a clever counter move.

"Ah. If so, what about getting me to write about the fourth Heaven's Feel? Something like *Fate/Zero*." So . . . impressive!!

Isn't this just great? To be honest, I even think this is an idea more wonderful that developing the *Hollow* game. Then we began to discuss about it:

"Talk about it, what is the fourth war about?"

"Hum—Saber getting bullied by Gilgamesh and Alexander!" I answered unceremoniously.

In my mind, there were two main points in the fourth Heaven's Feel. One was Saber's setback. King Arthur, who ruled her people as the model human. The selfless and devoted, just and uncorrupted Arturia. The absolute commander who surpassed mortals, the majestic Gilgamesh. And the extrovert king whom some called a tyrant, but still held his belief that he'll bring his people to happiness. The King of Conquerors, Alexander, who ruled the world as a man. Using the intensive conflict between the three to unravel Saber's story in *Zero*.

The other point was Kiritsugu's story. I contracted that to him according to his wishes as well. I do not care about other things anymore.

"I understand. Then I'll do it according to the way I like it to be. Ah, but I'll do my best to get the style of the piece close to *Fate*."

He is indeed Urobuchi Gen, able to think about TYPE-MOON's clients.

Afterward, we discussed it over and over. A few consecutive meet-ups later, the draft of Volume 1 was finally completed in the winter of 2004.

Some readers might be surprised. At the time, *Hollow* was obviously not finished, so why was Volume 1 concluded?!

(Because we were too busy at that time. In 2005 we also began to do a lot of new commercialization. Afterward, as we sorted out all the personnel, the company got back on track again.)

Because of that, Urobuchi-san thought "*Zero* is a story based on *Fate*. So it's better if *Zero* did not become available to the public before *Fate* is released." Therefore, after waiting for a year, it was finally released in the winter of 2006. That was how things went.

The above is Urobuchi-san's and *Zero's* initial encounter. Although only we creators thought it would be an interesting project at the time, today when the story is approaching its conclusion, I have no doubt *Zero* will become a piece that everyone who likes *Fate* will be eagerly expecting.

Volume 1 is the prologue. The war begins in Volume 2; the pitched battle and its astonishments come in Volume 3. Lastly, there is the utterly despairing Volume 4 (currently being written). Please enjoy the joy of *Fate* that Urobuchi is bringing to us all.

Oh, no. Maybe Urobuchi's Heaven's Feel is indeed the true Hell.

The typeface used almost exclusively throughout this volume is Aldus LT Std, designed by Herman Zapf and published by Adobe Type.

The novel title is set in Palatino LT Std, from the same designer, to which Aldus LT forms a lovely book weight text face companion.

Both typefaces feature letterforms based on the humanist fonts of the Italian Renaissance. The broad-nibbed strokes lend calligraphic grace, and the text proportions make for easy reading at normal distances.

Body text is set at 12pt/16pt, while footnotes are set at 8pt/10pt.